

CALLS TO BE COUNTED: RHETORICS OF AGGREGATION AND NUMERICAL
REPRESENTATION IN 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

BY

NIKKI WEICKUM

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Communication
in the Graduate College of the
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2019

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Ned O’Gorman, Chair
Associate Professor J. David Cisneros
Professor Cara Finnegan
Professor Kevin Hamilton

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examine the role various forms of counting citizens have played in mass campaigns in twentieth-century American political culture. Scholarship in political science, history and rhetorical studies tells us that the census and public opinion polling have long been used to tell Americans who they are or to justify political actions in democracy. Scholarship on citizenship suggests that civic rituals and collective civic actions are a substantial way citizens learn or lay claim to citizenship and understand their obligations or relationship to the collective. My research project fills this gap by examining mass movements in 20th century civic culture that make many of these same claims to public identity or beliefs, and negotiate many of the same tensions of homogeneity and difference. In each case, I analyze how calls to be counted articulate what it means to be counted as one among many in a mass campaign or as part of a collective citizenry more broadly, and why being counted matters at all. My dissertation consists of four case studies, beginning with women's suffrage petitions in the early 1910s, continuing with President Franklin Roosevelt's calls for citizens to send letters en masse from 1934-1937, proceeding to the Million Man March in 1995, and culminating in Moveon.org's groundbreaking 1998 online petition campaign. In my analysis, I find that arguments about what it means to be counted are shaped by the specifics of the contexts, issues, and technologies of counting. Central to these distinct arguments about counting is the concern for what is being counted by the campaign, from public opinion, demands, a nation, or public interest; all represented through distinct types of counting, from degree to quantity, aggregation, or oneness. These are bolstered by common rhetorical figures of counting, including magnitude, accumulation, repetition, and elaboration; as well as an emphasis on time and space.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I walked into my first semester at the University of Illinois, I imagined that my preparation as a master's student would make for an easy transition. I believed I had already learned how to be an effective graduate student and that I understood all the expectations. This would turn out to be *categorically* untrue. A variety of people deserve thanks for helping me adjust through their generosity, patience, and kindness. This begins, of course, with my advisor Ned O'Gorman who deserves a great deal of credit for changing the way I think about research and the types of questions worth asking. His flair for poetic metaphors for the writing and revision process softened the difficulties of receiving criticism and made my work much better. Here is to cutting the dead wood off my beautiful tree. Cara Finnegan taught me the importance of carefully reading the text and using clear and straightforward writing. It is to her credit, "methods" seems a much less scary term now. Kevin Hamilton is a model for asking kind, enthusiastic, and productive questions. J. David Cisneros is generous in his insightful and challenging feedback, and has been a model for clarity of writing.

I owe a debt to my graduate colleagues who have supported me throughout the process. A great deal of credit is due to the wise elders of Rohini Singh and Anita Mixon who offered excellent models to emulate and were willing to share their experiences. Anita Mixon taught me to "do what I want" and though it took her months to decide I was worth speaking to instead of circling around the back of my chair, her words of wisdom would make a difference. Rohini Singh is the funniest person I know, and the best writer of e-mails. I have benefitted greatly from her friendship, generosity, and frank advice. And no, neither of you two need a jacket, it is 75 degrees outside. In addition to models to look up to, I could not have made it through without

someone to go through it with. Paul McKean was an invaluable friend throughout the process. His endless enthusiasm for my work—even in moments where I was much less enthusiastic—is best encapsulated by the plethora of articles he sent me on Facebook. I hope someday to write as perfect an opening anecdote as he does.

My graduate cohort was equally invaluable. Ann and Jacob Bryan, Katie Bruner, and Tobias Reynolds-Tylus in particular have provided endless meals, baked goods, bad movies, writing feedback and pharmacy runs at some of my most stressful moments. To my various coffee shop writing partners without whom I would have gone days without speaking to another human being, thank you. Lillie Williamson offered frequent encouragement even though she's a night owl. John Moist was always willing to read or listen to ideas, and a great deal of entertainment even if he's not as funny as he thinks. Rhiannon Bettivia is always willing to get straight to the point and to meet at the coffee shop to work at any time.

To my family, who have had endless patience with my inability to send mail and presents on time during these many busy moments of graduate school. Mama, thanks for always answering the phone, listening and supporting. I owe a substantial debt of gratitude to my father, who helped me work through many bad drafts of my ideas. His tireless efforts to teach me verb-tense agreement, and his willingness to fix it when I failed to learn are a testament to his generosity and patience.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: ANXIETIES OF COUNTING IN DEMOCRACY.....	1
CHAPTER 2: “THE PUBLIC SPIRITED MINORITY”: COUNTING INTENSITY IN THE NATIONAL AMERICAN WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION 1908-1912	33
CHAPTER 3: “THINKING AS A NATION”: AGGREGATION AND AUTHENTICITY IN FDR’S APPEALS FOR LETTERS, 1934-1937	60
CHAPTER 4: “ONE [AFRICAN AMERICAN] NATION, UNDER GOD”: COUNTING AND VISIONS OF TRANSFORMATION IN THE 1995 MILLION MAN MARCH	86
CHAPTER 5: THE “FLASH CAMPAIGN”: COUNTING AS PUBLIC OPINION AND DEMAND, IN MOVEON’S 1998 ONLINE PETITION CAMPAIGN	110
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION	132

CHAPTER 1: ANXIETIES OF COUNTING IN DEMOCRACY

“[T]o care about democracy is to care whether and how citizens speak,” as Robert Hariman states.¹ The question of how (and how *should*) citizens speak is central to rhetorical scholarship. Rhetorical scholars celebrate “engaged citizens,” explicitly or implicitly contrasting them with more lackluster forms of engagement.² Ideals of the public see the collection of citizen data as displacing the citizen “voice” from political participation for the opinion survey, or even, the petition.³ A rhetorical construct of public opinion, Gerard Hauser argues, entails something more than merely being counted, aggregated, or quantified; it entails a capacity for judgment, and judgment requires discourse.⁴ Thus rhetorical studies together with related approaches to democratic citizenship, distances itself from merely “counting.”

And yet, counting citizen preferences, discourses and arguments, characteristics, and actions is a prominent way that the relation between the individual citizen and the collective “nation” or “public” has been imagined.⁵ Democratic citizens not only regularly speak through, but also about counting. Citizen groups debate government statistics or contest the quantitative

¹ Robert Hariman, “Amateur Hour: Knowing what to Love in Ordinary Democracy,” in *The Prettier Doll: Rhetoric, Discourse, and Ordinary Democracy*, ed. Karen Tracy, James P. McDaniel, and Bruce Gronbeck (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 224.

² E.g. Christian Erik J. Kock and Lisa Storm Villadsen, introduction to *Rhetorical Citizenship and Public Deliberation*, ed. Christian J. Koch and Lisa Strom Villadsen (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 5.

³ Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 18.

⁴ Gerard Hauser, introduction to *Rhetorical Democracy: Discursive Practices of Civic Engagement*, ed. Amy Grim and Gerard Hauser (Mawah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2008), 2.

⁵ Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of the Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 14.

measures that might represent majority opinion in polls.⁶ The concerns for the impact of counting on democratic deliberation only make more salient the need to understand how these counts are framed and contested in discourse.

Counting has taken on a number of discursive forms in American democracy. For one, being counted can mean being “aggregated.”⁷ Mass letter campaigns, rallies, votes and petitions are all forms of “counting” that often focus on the collection of signatures, bodies, or documents to demonstrate an addition as a sum being a simple “mass.” I use *aggregate* in this dissertation as a way to indicate a focus on a collective with an emphasis on size or volume. Some campaigns that rely on these aggregate forms of participation explicitly focus on representing the collective as a number, or *quantity*: a focus on a million signatures, or a hundred thousand bodies in a rally. Other mechanisms of more complex aggregation in polls or surveys seek to provide an aggregate in the form of *degree*, in which percentages, ratios, or other forms of comparison help to place actions or opinions on a scale to claim something about the whole, either in terms of its relationship to the broader population or trends within the whole. This is common to the discourses of social scientific sampling, the process by which a variety of agencies seek to use a sample—a “part”—in order to characterize a broader class of women, the middle class, voters, or American citizens: the “whole.” In turn, charts, graphs, and other forms of statistical representation often operationalize processes of citizenly quantification to provide a norm or “average” of that opinion, characteristic, or set of values. Finally, where the aggregate gestures to

⁶ J. Michael Hogan, *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age* (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1994); Frank J. Stec, “Bringing Attention to the Human Costs of War: Grievability, Deliberation, and Anti-War Numbers,” *Southern Communication Journal* 81, no. 5 (2016), 273.

⁷ Jeffrey J. Juris, “Reflections on #OccupyEverywhere: Social Media, Public Space, and Emerging Logics of Aggregation,” *American Ethnologists* 39, no.2 (May 2012): 260. Juris argues that aggregation involves gathering in one spaced, as opposed to more networking as more diffuse.

size without the precision of quantity, the idea of the whole as *oneness* or one—as in perhaps the one nation, or the American people—is too a discourse of counting, albeit one that glosses over the many even as it relies on a sense of a collective.

In addition to scholarly concerns for engagement, discourse, and judgment, the role of counting in citizenly opinion and collective identity has often inspired broader anxieties about the relation between the individual citizen and the collective political body. In particular, counting and grouping citizens produces anxieties about individual identity, expression, and the imposition of the “unruly” crowd. The long-held tensions between liberalism and republicanism gain particular traction when our sense of the collective is not just “community” but the aggregate of a “mass” or a “whole.” Hence, the tensions of the “mass” -- and the process of aggregation that inspires them -- are not self-evident extensions of the form of counting that produces them. Instead, these anxieties invite consideration for *how* the significance of these aggregate forms express a relation to the mass; specifically, being counted does not only mean being aggregated into a whole. Registering a vote, signing a petition, or showing up at a rally can be a means of individual expression, citizenly self-empowerment, civic duty, or social equalization.⁸

In this dissertation, I argue that aggregate campaigns—be it petitions or rallies— have often acquired narratives about what they can and do represent with respect to the aggregate they collect. Mass participation could be justified as a marker of public opinion (a directive, for example) or as an expression of collective or individual identity.⁹ By examining citizenly calls to

⁸ Robert Asen, “A Discourse Theory of Citizenship,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 2 (May 2004): 205. See Asen for this last point on equalization.

⁹ Herbst, *Numbered Voices*, 3. Herbst argues that numerical representations of opinion have long been perceived through their function to be made efficient for policy making, but that they have a long history of being used for symbolic purposes.

be counted by participating in aggregate campaigns, this dissertation project extends Danielle Allen's efforts to understand "how democratic citizens imagine 'the people' of which they are a part." Allen argues that modern citizenship's preoccupation with voting is a failure of this process of imagination. Elections make concrete the "will" of the people through "a mass compilation of votes." The metaphors by which citizens imagine the nation are thus given a "recognizable and living form," and in civic practices some are more productive or perhaps ethical than others.¹⁰ In this project, I aim to understand how citizens have been asked to imagine "the people" through the ways in which they have asked to be counted, and conversely, how quantitative civic practices shape these discourses. Closer attention to the rhetorical strategies of counting provides a better understanding of the potential or negative implications of counting through democratic deliberation and engagement.

To explore these issues, this dissertation focuses on citizen campaigns that see a telos in counting—be it in a quantity of a million signatures or an aggregate of bodies in order to better understand how citizens are asked to view what it means to "count" or be counted in American democracy. This project therefore explores the rhetorical problems of counting in public discourse—be it degree or a simple quantity by asking what counting meant to citizens in the twentieth-century American democracy.

This introduction proceeds in three sections. First, I will suggest that historical democratic practices of quantification exhibit a variety of discourses and tensions around counting. Second, I situate this project in the context of two bodies of literature: public opinion and citizenship studies. Third, I close by identifying the goals of the study, its methods, and proposed case studies.

¹⁰ Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 16.

The Problem: Calls to be Counted

As Sarah Igo and other scholars show, aggregate measures of citizen beliefs and characteristics have played a significant role in our understanding of American democracy and its citizens. Surveys and polls have not only long rendered citizens visible to government and private institutions, they have reflexively provided Americans with a sense of “who they are, where they fit, and how they compare to other citizens.”¹¹ Aggregates of citizen characteristics or beliefs have also provided plenty of fodder for debate. Americans have often called to be counted in order to contest their lack of agency or influence in the political process, and endeavor to assert their authority. Likewise, political leaders and governing institutions have counted in order to assert or otherwise forward their own authority.¹² Counting, in short, is and has been basic to the logic and rhetoric of political authority in mass democracies. A history of calls to be counted, therefore, is also a history of the tensions of representative democracy.

In this section, I use historical examples to illustrate a range of ways citizens have called to be counted in order to demonstrate that citizens have engaged in many of the same counting practices that have often been attributed solely to institutions. In addition, I show that these calls to be counted articulate a range of what it means to consider the various discourses of representing the whole, from an aggregate, quantity, degree or oneness. Finally, I close by considering how the democratic anxieties engendered by these campaigns present constraints.

The voting booth has been a key site of calls to be counted, from the women’s suffrage movement of the 1920s to controversies over “hanging chads” in the 2000 presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush. In the 1950s and 60s, the civil rights movement took

¹¹ Igo, *Averaged American*, 15.

¹² David Levasseur, “The Role of Public Opinion in Policy Argument: An Examination of Public Opinion Rhetoric in the Federal Budget Process” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 41, no.3 (2005), 155-157.

issue with discriminatory practices that barred African Americans from voting, a theme that continues to have salience in contemporary arguments about restrictive voter identification laws that manifest in calls to be “allowed” to be counted. Being counted is often a form by which individuals come to see themselves as “counting” or mattering in democratic society. Citizens have also called for a right to be counted at different stages of the democratic process through the vote, as was the case in popular arguments about voting in the primaries during the progressive era. Public controversies over elections, like that of the contentious campaign to remove Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker in 2012, reveal calls to be counted *again*. Calls to be counted, that is, are one way that citizens’ express dissatisfaction over a desire for more substantive input into democratic decision making and governing.

Citizens have also emphasized the mass expression of opinion as an important mode of making demands of the state. Counting signatures on mass petitions became a means for citizens to express their political opinion on policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹³ When the popular opinion represented in mass petitions is ignored by those in power—as seen in Shay’s Rebellion (1787), the Whiskey Rebellion (1794), and most notably in the language of the Declaration of Independence—the neglect of petitions can serve as a justification for more radical forms of protest, even revolution.¹⁴ Beyond petitions per se, letter campaigns, prewritten comment cards, and campaigns meant to inundate political representatives with phone calls are all practices by which citizens seek to be counted for political effect. It was progressive activists and not institutions that were initially at the forefront of collecting survey information from citizens with an eye to social reform. Contemporary examples – such as recent citizen initiatives

¹³ Raymond C. Bailey, *Popular Influence upon Public Policy: Petitioning in Eighteenth-Century Virginia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 27-29.

¹⁴ Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery & Women’s Political Identity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 18.

to collect data about experiences of racial discrimination from law enforcement – call for citizen experiences to be counted as a way to contest insufficient institutional metrics and enter public debate.

Citizens have also sought to have their very “heads” counted as a means of expressing political opinions. They have showed up at marches, rallies, assemblies, and other political gatherings to perform acts of identity and make a show of force. Numerous social movements in modern American history—from the civil rights movement, to pro- and anti-abortion movements, to Occupy Wall Street—have relied on the rhetoric of counting in this way to exercise political influence.¹⁵ Citizen groups responsible for the 1999 World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, for example, wanted to take advantage of the global stage set by the Clinton Administration by gathering *en masse*.¹⁶ It is this sentiment that makes journalistic practices around attendance counts at rallies particularly contentious for activists who believe that underestimation presents a detriment to their public impact.¹⁷ Like voting and petitioning, rallies sometimes seek to apply pressure, or create visibility, albeit in ways less easily calculated.

And then there is the internet, which has created new contexts, processes, and rhetorics for citizenly aggregation. Citizen organizations during the net neutrality debate called for prewritten comments to the FCC in ways that emphasized numbers over unique suggestions to demonstrate the majority of Americans. Likewise, social media spaces like Twitter hashtags and Facebook groups have become sites in which citizen activists seek to gather as many users as possible around a particular issue, from Occupy to the collection of instances of gender

¹⁵ Herbst, *Numbered Voices*, 133-153; Juris, “Reflections on Occupy,” 262.

¹⁶ Kevin Michael Deluca and Jennifer Peebles, “From Public Sphere to Public Screen: Democracy, Activism, and the ‘Violence’ of Seattle,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no.2 (2002): 138.

¹⁷ Herbst, *Numbered Voices*, 149-153.

discrimination through #yesallwomen.¹⁸ Petition websites have often been sold as a way to build community and promote engagement as a whole, rather than through particular issues.

American history is full of citizenly calls to be counted, or as the case has often been, to be counted *differently*. The American Philosophical Society, for example, created and signed a petition to Congress in 1800 to add more categories to the census.¹⁹ Steven Kelman argues that various groups desired to be counted in the census as a way to earn special status, but also to be included in the context of the “normal.” In addition, redistricting has long been a source of arguments for new modes of counting.

These historic practices of democratic quantification reach down into the very discourse of democratic citizens: citizens variously want and do not want to be “counted” for various reasons and in various contexts. These examples serve not just to illustrate a history of practices and calls to be counted, but also often coincide with citizens who justify and describe the significance of being counted. These debates over how citizens are counted recall and revise Hariman’s comment that began this chapter: to care about democracy is to care whether and how citizens *are counted*.

Still, the discourses and practices around the counting of citizens inspire more than a few anxieties in American democratic culture. Hannah Arendt suggests that at the heart of these anxieties is what she calls the “crisis of authority.” In *On Revolution*, she notes that the majoritarianism built into democratic forms of governance carries with it the risk of undermining the very conditions for democracy, as the will of the majority implies not only the existence of a minority, but “majority rule” risks discounting (or, more perniciously, eradicating) the voices,

¹⁸ Juris, “Reflections on #Occupy,” 261.

¹⁹ Steven Kelman, “The Political Foundations of American Statistical Policy,” in *The Politics of Numbers*, ed. William Alonso and Paul Starr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987), 287.

will, and sentiments of the minority.²⁰ Majoritarianism, argues Richard Tuck, has long inspired fears of a democratic “monarchical sovereign” with unchecked powers through majority vote.²¹ This becomes particularly salient when, as Jeffrey Drury argues, invocations of concepts like “public opinion” authorized by social scientific methods do not only sanction political decision making but also “recognize and afford legitimacy” to those in power.²² Majorities legitimize part of the public, but often carry an association with the will of the “people” more uniformly.

Counting has often been a source of trepidation about the role of the state in private life. In the early stages of opinion surveys, for example, Americans viewed poll results with great suspicion for the private nature of the very public results. The numbers often did not seem to be accurate to their own perceptions.²³ Today, Americans continue to express complex feelings about the census: on the one hand, being “counted” on the census can provide important financial support from the state. On the other, racial minorities in particular have often expressed a mistrust of government and skepticism of the categories being counted as justifications for refusing to participate in the census.²⁴

These anxieties do not disappear when it is citizens or advocacy organizations that collect citizen data for political purposes. Aggregates of citizens are often viewed as the work of “pressure groups” rather than actual participation. Despite his affinity for collecting citizen opinions, for example, Franklin Roosevelt held much less esteem for the bags of pre-written letters he received which paled in comparison to the “scrawled, perhaps illiterate, but always

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 155.

²¹ Richard Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 257.

²² Jeffrey Mehlretter Drury, *Speaking with the People’s Voice: How President’s Invoke Opinion* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 5.

²³ Igo, *Averaged American*, 18-19.

²⁴ Sarah Kershaw, “Who Lives Here? Who’s Asking?; In a Black Community Official Mistrust Hinders Census,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), May 16, 2000.

sincere note from the obscure person.”²⁵ In this context, counting also places the citizen and their right to individual expression as a passive spectator in the process. For example, popular narratives about online petitioning lament the low effort required for so-called “slacktivists.” These anxieties depend, not just on the existence of the aggregate, but on how that aggregate is expressed. For example, the response to increasingly popular mass petition campaigns in the 1830s revolved around a lack of deference and an increasing emphasis on citizenly “demands” of the legislature.²⁶ Petitions, in other words, required an expression of citizenship that negated the mass or the ever-present fear of the unruly and illogical “crowd.”

Thus, numerical aggregates have only further entrenched a number of democratic anxieties around conformity, the imposition of the state, and a fear of the unruly “mass” or crowd. These anxieties can at times come into conflict with American commitments to individualism and “voice,” namely through discursive expressions of opinion. In this context, it is not simply that certain civic practices orient around aggregation and inspire these anxieties, but also how citizens and civic groups have justified these practices. As one example of how counting is both integral to the rhetorical construction of political authority and fraught with anxieties and tensions, let us turn to public opinion polling.

Contestations Over Methods of Counting “the Public”

A small subset of public opinion scholars sees survey results as contributing to political agenda setting by virtue of their ability to include all citizens in democratic processes.²⁷ One

²⁵ Michael Wilrich, “‘Close to that Place of Hell’: Poor Women and the Cultural Politics of Prohibition,” *Journal of Urban History* 29, no. 5 (2003): 559.

²⁶ David C. Frederick, “John Quincy Adams, Slavery, and the Disappearance of the Right of Petition,” *Law and History Review* 9, no.1 (1991), 120-138.

²⁷ Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Politicians Don’t Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 18; Sidney Verba,

school of political scientific thought suggests that aggregates are able to counterbalance the biases of the electorate on the strength of their numbers.²⁸ More often, public opinion scholars argue that polls cannot be translated into adequate representations of public opinion in democratic discourse. Scott Althaus situates the reluctance to see a political avenue for public opinion polls as an extension of the longstanding discussion of the methodological challenges of achieving a representative sample.²⁹ Adam Berinsky, for example, argues that survey refusals are disproportionately high in particular demographics. This eliminates diverse perspectives necessary for proper representative sampling.³⁰ In turn, contemporary scholars view survey results as narrow sources of information that identify and explain broad preferences and behaviors but do not fully represent them.³¹

The challenges of inclusion are only further exacerbated in the context of the proliferation of poll results in journalism and public discourse. Empirical studies of the role of surveys in the democratic process provide context for understanding how the public has broadly engaged with statistical representations of opinion. Studies have centered on two concerns: the influence of public opinion on public policy and citizen perception and interaction with poll results. To the former, scholars of public opinion often suggest we should aim to *limit* rather than expand the role of polling. A report on polls and democracy released by the Association for American Public Opinion Research, for example, suggests that public opinion scholars should

“The Citizen as Respondent: Sample Surveys and American Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 1 (1996): 1-7.

²⁸ Robert S. Erickson and Kent L. Tedin, *American Public Opinion: Its Origin, Content and Impact* (New York: Pearson, 2005), 1-15.

²⁹ Scott Althaus, *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 282.

³⁰ Adam J. Berinsky, *Silent Voices: Opinion Polls and Political Representation in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 2-4.

³¹ Althaus, *Collective Preferences*, 290.

help policy experts understand that polls should not directly translate to citizen preferences or replace expert information in political decision making.³² In other words, they argue that polls should not necessarily directly translate to policy issues.

Proponents of a more limited role for polls in democratic discourse also cite the potential impact polls might have on limiting public debate of issues. Scholars concerned with the “bandwagon effect” have tried to gauge whether established markers of public sentiment are likely to have an impact on individual preferences.³³ On a broader level, scholars suggest that citizens are more likely to align with an opinion that they know is more popular.³⁴ Perhaps more significantly, scholars argue that the circulation and distribution of poll results might hold undue influence on opinion formation and displace other “richer formulations.”³⁵ A poll that cites 90% of the American population, for example, masquerades as a decision that has already been made, and thus does not invite further engagement.³⁶ Aggregate campaigns like petitioning, even ones that make claims to public opinion, have much more space to present that opinion as not yet “finished.” Nonetheless, these concerns suggest that an emphasis on numerical aggregates in democratic discourse often place constraints on the kinds of engagement it offers to citizens.

Debates over the influence of polls on policy, however, suggest that there is much more space for citizens to dispute even statistical representations of citizen characteristics and

³² Frank Newport, et al, *Polling and Democracy: Report of the AAPOR Task Force on Public Opinion and Leadership*, special report prepared for the Association for American Public Opinion Research, 2013.

³³ The concept of bandwagoning was a popular framework in the early 1990s, but the use of the term largely seems to have disappeared. See for example Catherine Marsh, “Back on the Bandwagon: The Effect of Public Opinion Polls on Public Opinion,” *British Journal of Political Science* 15, no. 1 (1985): 51-74.

³⁴ Diana C. Mutz, “Impersonal Influence: Effects of Representations of Public on Political Attitudes,” *Political Behavior* 14, no. 2 (1992): 89-122.

³⁵ Herbst, *Numbered Voices*, 166.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

preferences. Alain Desrosières argues that rigorous debates over counting in the United States meant “more than in other countries,” yet these statistics “were linked to the process of argumentation rather than to some truth presumed to be superior.”³⁷ Within the policy world, Susan Herbst shows that different stakeholders in the policy process have varied understandings of what counts as public opinion and how to measure it.³⁸ Activists, for example, tended to view aggregate measures as more reliable than elites or journalists, whereas local politicians placed trust in personal networks.³⁹

If public opinion is not always synonymous with statistical representation in the policy sphere, so too do studies of the perceptions of citizens offer a murkier sense of what these polls can tell the broader public. In studies of citizens that ask them to provide their perceptions of polls, many citizens express that public opinion and polls are distinct concerns. Further, these studies suggest that citizens do not identify poll results as fully accurate representations, even if they are likely to be influenced by public opinion more broadly.⁴⁰ Igo points out that historically, Americans held often-contradictory perceptions of survey research, where they both questioned the validity of the results even as they accepted some of the norms these results showed.⁴¹

Empirical accounts of the influence of opinion polls suggest that politicians and ordinary citizens engage frequently with some sense of public opinion, and that polls are often a popular practice in journalism. Taken together, the discussion of the diffuse impact of polling on policy

³⁷ Alain Desrosières, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 192.

³⁸ Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View The Democratic Process* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 151.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁰ Herbst, *Numbered Voices*, 18. Herbst argues that though these studies are inconclusive – the limitations of polls are more often a result of the narrow structured process of opinion measurement.

⁴¹ Igo, *Averaged American*, 16.

decisions, and the suggestion that citizens often dispute the representations of aggregates that are given to them, suggests that discourse about aggregates in general involve a complex discursive negotiation. In other words, even statistical forms of aggregate representation are not fully self-evident or indisputable. There is room for citizens to make claims to represent something like public opinion through other forms of representation like repeated conversations with other citizens or aggregate practices like petitions. In part, this is because public opinion is itself a diffuse concept.

The central contribution of opinion scholarship to this project is to emphasize that the concept of public opinion itself is contested. That is, what we understand to count as public opinion requires consideration of how different measures of opinion –like polls or news coverage—come to stand in for the public.⁴² Theories of the “public-as-fiction,” J. Michael Hogan explains, “correctly suggest the public's role in the policy-making process is a product, not of the actual opinions of the great mass of real people, but of the portraits of the people constructed rhetorically by the policy makers themselves.” This does not mean that public opinion is a “wholesale” fiction, but rather that it is debatable; and indeed, Hogan finds, it is heavily debated.⁴³

Herbst argues that what public opinion means is often revealed through micro articulations, where people tend to “define public opinion as part of the argument they make” about particular issues.⁴⁴ These claims about public opinion are inseparable from broader

⁴² W. Lance Bennett, “Constructing Publics and Their Opinions,” *Political Communication* 10, no. 2 (1993): 103. See also: Murray Edelman, “Contestable Categories and Public Opinion,” *Political Communication*, 10, no. 3 (1993): 231-242.

⁴³ Hogan, *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign*, 120.

⁴⁴ Herbst, *Reading Public Opinion*, 13.

“mental models” of how democracy functions.⁴⁵ At the same time, as Herbert Blumer argues, what counts as public opinion is often reflective of political and social conditions of a given moment.⁴⁶ In that sense, there are often dominant paradigms of opinion to contend with. This project extends this work by studying micro articulations--- in citizenly calls to be counted--- that show how citizen groups reveal and dispute dominant constructs of public opinion and aggregate representations.

In addition to the constraints of dominant paradigms, research into the social construction of public opinion suggests that methods do play a significant role in how the aggregate representation is perceived. Conceptions of public opinion are at least in part reflective of the methods by which a given measure is collected.⁴⁷ For example, advances in social scientific methods are precisely what allowed polls to gain prominence as “objective” measures in American public discourse.⁴⁸ Discursive justifications of opinion metrics have often relied on the methods of collection to make claims about their relevance and objectivity to the general citizenry.⁴⁹ Methods of collecting opinion, however, present some barriers for citizens to contest opinion measures. Where there is certainly ample evidence to suggest that politicians think differently about public opinion in the era of polling, there is less evidence that they do so publicly. That is, in drawing on public opinion to justify particular actions, politicians rarely refer specifically to polls or other means of understanding the public will. They are much more

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁶ See Herbert Blumer, “Collective Behavior” in *New Outlines of the Principles of Sociology*, ed. Alfred Lee (New York: Barnes and Noble), 167-222.

⁴⁷ Igo, *Averaged American*, 5.

⁴⁸ Igo, *Averaged American*, 1-10. For example, Igo’s historical account of early survey research reveals the link between academic and technological advancements and the rise of aggregate metrics of opinion.

⁴⁹ Gerard Hauser, “Vernacular Dialogue and the Rhetoricity of Public Opinion,” *Communication Monographs*, 65, no. 2 (1998), 104; Herbst, *Numbered Voices*.

likely to refer broadly to the “majority of Americans,” or even the singular “American public.”⁵⁰

“Finally, it is important to note that the “channels of political representation” conceived by public opinion scholarship are limited by the strict delineations of the methods and contexts that are often studied. It is in this context that the limitations of the commitments of public opinion scholarship for this project are most apparent. Public opinion has often been studied as narrow expressions of opinion collected by scholars and institutions.⁵¹ Taeku Lee, for example, argues that the Civil Rights movement reveals the commitments of public opinion scholars, who have too often suggested that elite opinion drives mass opinion. This has often led them to ignore the role of social movements and the interaction between elites and the masses.⁵² Even perspectives that engage with aggregates of individual citizens have not given much attention to the role of the citizen beyond the recipient or provider of that individual opinion. In addition, public opinion scholarship has often focused on political opinions of citizens solely with respect to pre-determined policy issues.⁵³ Thus, these paradigms, it seems, are not sufficient for understanding how citizens have counted themselves or called to be counted, or for understanding the rhetorical power of counting itself in democracies. By one line of thinking, the alternative to polling and public opinion scholarship in constituting political authority is the

⁵⁰ Fay Lomax Cook, Jason Barabas and Benjamin I. Page, “Invoking Public Opinion: Policy Elites and Social Security,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 235-264; David Levasseur, “The Role of Public Opinion in Policy Argument: An Examination of Public Opinion Rhetoric in the Federal Budget Process, Argumentation and Advocacy,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 41, no. 3 (2005), 164. Cook, Barabas and Page analyze policy elites in a series of social security debates to show that appeals to public opinion are relatively prevalent, but often ambiguous. Levasseur finds a similar pattern of argument in budget hearings, though he suggests that references to public opinion are less common.

⁵¹ Taeku Lee, “The Sovereign Status of Survey Data.” in *Navigating Public Opinion: Polls, Policy, and the Future of American Democracy*, eds. Jeff Manza, Fay Lomax Cook, and Benjamin I. Page (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 290-312.

⁵² Taeku Lee, *Mobilizing Public Opinion: Black Insurgency and Racial Attitudes in the Civil Rights Era* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 6.

⁵³ Robert S. Erickson and Kent L. Tedin, *American Public Opinion: Its Origin, Content and Impact* (New York: Pearson, 2005), 85.

practice of citizenship itself.

Citizenship: Civic Rituals and Collective Enumeration

Studies of citizenship call us to consider a much broader set of practices beyond citizen preferences, from petitioning, to voting, to participation in social movements and deliberation. As a field, citizenship has been studied in a variety of contexts that include citizenship as legal recognition; rights; practices; or collective identity and membership.⁵⁴ In this review, I focus first on theories of citizenship as a collective identity and the performance of civic rituals; and second, on historical accounts of statistics, surveys, and polls in providing a sense of American nationalism and civic identity. I argue that we have not yet done enough to understand the relationship between aggregate acts and the numerical representations that they often produce.

Scholars of citizenship also emphasize the importance of studying citizenship in *practice*. For example, Robert Asen theorizes citizenship as “a mode of public engagement,” rather than as a “possession” which requires attention to how citizens enact citizenship.⁵⁵ J. David Cisneros argues that this process often involves a shift from normative to “empirical grounds” to study how citizenship has been defined in specific practices through both discourse and performance.⁵⁶ Using theories of citizenship that emphasize enactment, performance or ritual, I intend to demonstrate how participation in practices of civic engagement like voting influence our conceptions of what it means to be a citizen and to be “counted” as one.

Citizenship is constructed over time outside of strict legal interpretations of rights. Isaac

⁵⁴ For a useful categorization of literature on citizenship, see Linda Bosniak, “Universal Citizenship and the Problem of Alienage,” *Northwestern University Law Review* 94 (2000): 963. See also Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, “Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory,” *Ethics* 104 (1994): 352.

⁵⁵ Robert Asen, “A Discourse Theory of Citizenship,” 191.

⁵⁶ J. David Cisneros, “The Rhetorics of Citizenship: Pitfalls and Possibilities,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100 (2014): 376.

West argues, for example, that legal status or rights are not “self-executing” but instead require attention to how they are articulated in specific cultural circumstances.⁵⁷ In this context, citizenship can be a site in which new collective identities are articulated.⁵⁸ Scholars have studied how political rhetors, most often presidents, have constructed national identities that provide ideal characteristics or duties of citizens.⁵⁹ Beyond their articulation in discourse, scholars suggest that participation in the rituals of citizenship like voting or petitioning is one way that citizens have made claims to citizen status that they were otherwise denied.⁶⁰ For example, Susan Zaeske’s account of women’s abolitionist petitions shows how women made claims to citizenship as a political subjectivity through the act of signing a petition.⁶¹

Of particular relevance to this project, is how scholars of citizenship have attempted to show that the relationship between the individual and the collective is a significant challenge of modern citizenship. Robert Hariman and John Lucaites argue that iconic images of individuals serve as sources of civic identity precisely because they “exemplify” the magnitude appropriate to collective identity while maintaining a basis for individualized identification suitable to a

⁵⁷ Isaac West, *Transforming Citizenship: Transgender Articulations of the Law* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 8.

⁵⁸ Allison Piepmeyer, *Out in Public: Configurations of Women’s Bodies in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004): 130.

⁵⁹ E.g., Mary E. Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004); Vanessa Beasley, *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2013).

⁶⁰ Josue David Cisneros, “(Re)Bordering the Civic Imaginary: Rhetoric, Hybridity, and Citizenship in La Gran Marcha” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97 (2011): 26-49; Angela G. Ray, “The Rhetorical Ritual of Citizenship: Women’s Voting as Public Performance, 1868-1875,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 93, no. 1 (2007): 1-26.

⁶¹ Susan Zaeske, “Signatures of Citizenship: The Rhetoric of Women’s Antislavery Petitions,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88.2 (2002): 148. Zaeske suggest that abolitionist women articulated themselves as citizens in the text of the petition, but also through the act of signing petitions.

liberal-democratic society.”⁶² The particular practices and discourses of citizenship similarly constrain the rhetorical possibilities of citizenship in offering a particular vision of the relation between the individual and a community. For example, Judith Shklar argues the right to vote has become central to defining citizenship because it was a status symbol that differentiated between members of a community.⁶³ Similarly, Allen argues that the process of citizen relations has often centered on metaphors of “oneness” that require homogeneity, rather than “wholeness” that would allow differentiation.⁶⁴

The potential for citizenship to offer unproductive relations to the whole has inspired a significant debate about whether citizenship is a productive concept in a healthy democracy. A number of scholars have seen citizenship as a rhetorically potent call to membership in a community that might address the challenges of modern democracy.⁶⁵ On the other hand, scholars have also argued that citizenship operates primarily to enforce boundaries of exclusion.⁶⁶ These critiques are particularly significant for a project that examines articulations of numerical representations of the collective, given that such representations have often been used to establish borders and norms. This project aligns with approaches that have argued for the need to consider both the exclusionary capacity of citizenship and its potential for collective

⁶² Robert Hariman and John Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 91.

⁶³ Judith Shklar, *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 1958), 22-24; Ronald Beiner, “Why Citizenship Constitutes a Theoretical Problem in the Twentieth Century,” in *Theorizing Citizenship*, ed. Richard Beiner (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 2.

⁶⁶ See for example Karma Chavez, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 13; Glen S. Coulthard, “Subjects of Empire: Indigenous Peoples and the ‘Politics of Recognition’ in Canada,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 6 (2007): 437-460.

identification and engagement.⁶⁷ As Cisneros argues, enacting citizenship is often a “hybrid” that both offers possibilities and engages with habits that enable certain norms and identities of citizenship over others.⁶⁸

Aggregative forms of civic participation offer a unique set of constraints for how citizenship as membership can be imagined. Concern for the enforcement of “oneness” or “homogeneity” has led some scholars to view voting as an unproductive way to imagine citizenship.⁶⁹ For example, Engin Isin and Greg Nielsen argue established rituals like voting do not adequately break with the norms of civic engagement. Voting is doubly insufficient given the individual nature of the act.⁷⁰ In contrast, Angela Ray argues, “voting itself calls attention to the interplay of the individual actor and the collective, as the citizen performs the ritual creating and displaying an active public.”⁷¹ Voting is thus one way in which the individual citizen considers, but also experiences, the nation and other citizens. This process is made only more salient when considering civic practices that aim specifically at the collection of a numerical aggregate. This project approaches the challenges of citizenship, both in imagining the relation between the part and the whole, and the potential for exclusion by considering carefully the form in which citizens are asked to participate.

A second subset of scholarship on citizenship has specifically explored the role of the numerical aggregate in representing “who we are” and “what we believe.”⁷² Scholarly accounts

⁶⁷ West, *Transforming Citizenship*, 6; Robert Dechaine, ‘Bordering the Civic Imaginary: Alienization, Fence Logic, and the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps,’ *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95 (2009): 44.

⁶⁸ Cisneros, “Re-bordering the Civic Imaginary,” 32.

⁶⁹ Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 19.

⁷⁰ Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, introduction to *Acts of Citizenship*, ed. Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen (New York: Zed Books, 2008), 371.

⁷¹ Ray, “The Rhetorical Ritual,” 18.

⁷² Igo, *Averaged American*, 15.

of aggregative discourse in citizenly identity have often focused on statistical representation – through census data, public polls, and other such institutional metrics that can be quantified and compared. Such quantification of citizens is often attributed to the rise of mass society or to what Paul Starr refers to as the “rationalization” of comparative politics.⁷³ Through statistics policymakers are able to justify policies, political parties are able to fine-tune platforms, corporations are able to create and appeal to market segments, and so on.

William Alonso and Paul Starr’s influential account of the systems of government data collection argues that official statistics collected by the census have influenced American society both with respect to policy and to what Alonso and Starr refer to variously as “images of our society” and “national self-perceptions.”⁷⁴ Igo adds that social surveys helped to create a sense of the very existence of the mass public.⁷⁵ The power of quantification—rendering citizen beliefs and acts as numbers—has been magnified by a claim to “objectivity.” Statistics offer citizens a “scientific” representation of themselves and other citizens.

Yet, if statistics play a role in how Americans understand themselves, how they implement this process is a matter of scholarly debate. Some argue that statistics emerge from and articulate American citizenship as a function of “diverse and competing groups” that are derived in part from the “discrete categorizations” of data collection processes around the census and surveys.⁷⁶ In other words, statistics present Americans as a citizenry differentiated into

⁷³ Paul Starr, “Sociology of Statistics,” in *The Politics of Numbers*, ed. William Alonso and Paul Starr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987), 13-14.

⁷⁴ William Alonso and Paul Starr, introduction to *The Politics of Numbers*, ed. William Alonso and Paul Starr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987), 1-6.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 5. Alonso and Starr situate statistics in the context of two competing schools of thought: one focused on “diverse and competing groups” and the other on “undifferentiated common good.” For Alonso and Starr, the “triumph” of “empirical study” largely aligns with a liberal and pluralist view of

various socio-economic categorizations. Hence, Theodore Porter argues that statistics are unique in part for the “demands placed on people to classify things so that they could be counted and placed in the appropriate box in an official table.”⁷⁷ Likewise William Peterson argues that the appeal of the census and statistics is that they provide recognition for minority populations who could be identified and situated among other groups in the national whole.⁷⁸ Being counted can be a form through which individuals come to see themselves as “counted” or mattering in democratic society.

Other scholars have demonstrated that statistical data has also provided a problematic vision of cohesion rather than differentiation. Categories in the census were often calculated to derive “median” values that helped describe and configure norms.⁷⁹ Igo suggests that the modern opinion survey became so prevalent in part because of the ways it “responded to a cultural demand for common mores in the face of anxiety about heterogeneity and a lack of national unity.”⁸⁰ In practice, statistical representation often accomplishes both. Kelman’s study of discourse about statistics is particularly instructive here for the ways in which it demonstrates the power of aggregation to foster identity *and* difference.⁸¹ Stephanie Grey argues that this dual

American democracy where more republican accounts were much less invested in perpetuating statistical measures.

⁷⁷ Theodore Porter, *The Rise of Statistical Thinking: 1820-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 11. See also, Ian Hacking, “Biopower and the Avalanche of Printed Numbers,” *Humanities in Society* 5 (1983): 280. Hacking positions the impact of statistics as arising from the ways it “demands kinds of things to count.”

⁷⁸ William Peterson, “The Politics and the Measurement of Ethnicity,” *The Politics of Numbers*, ed. William Alonso and Paul Starr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987) 187-235.

⁷⁹ See for example Charles F. Westoff, foreword to *The Politics of Numbers*, ed. William Alonso and Paul Starr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987), ix. Westoff identifies this as an explicit goal of a popular series of volumes on the census, in this case the 1980s, though other such series exist.

⁸⁰ Igo, *Averaged American*, 8-11.

⁸¹ Steven Kelman, “The Political Foundations of American Statistical Policy,” in *The Politics of Numbers*, ed. William Alonso and Paul Starr, 275-303 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987).

function can be used to foster hierarchy while also building community.⁸² Like conceptions of public opinion, understanding collective identity thus requires attention to how these values are described and circulated, and how citizens respond.

Studies of citizenship help us consider the processes of imagining collective ties and identities. Citizenship results from numerical representations in civic discourse as well as participation in aggregative civic rituals. These concepts of civic identity in relation to the aggregate, however, have often focused solely on institutional data in the census and surveys. This limits our understanding of the role of aggregates in democratic discourse by focusing more substantively on only one form of aggregation: in statistical representation. Similarly, it ignores the process by which these aggregates are collected. In addition, studies of the performance or habits of citizenship have helpfully revealed the importance of how citizens participate in civic life to our conceptions of what citizenship is. However, these accounts have focused on performance or practice to the point that it has often ignored the numerical representations that are produced as part of that participation. The contribution of this dissertation is to begin to understand how a telos towards numerical representation frames and perhaps influences the performance of citizenship that is so essential to the habits and practices studied by scholars. I argue that this requires attention to how citizens justify, negotiate and respond to the numerical representations that are produced by their own practices and rituals.

Method and Chapter Summary

This dissertation explores the discourses of counting in four case studies across twentieth century American democracy. Political scientist John Gerring defines a case study as the “in

⁸² Stephanie H. Grey, “The Statistical War on Equality: Visions of American Virtuosity in The Bell Curve,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 85 (1999): 317.

depth study of a single unit” that is meant to speak to “a larger class of similar phenomena.”⁸³ As a class, I have selected four citizen movements in which numerical representation is an explicit goal. Each chapter focuses on a moment in which the counting organized around an exemplary call to be counted that animates broader questions about the class, but also investigates a unique angle of civic movements around counting in each case. My aim is to better understand how Americans have been asked to imagine their relationship to other citizens and their role in government decision making through distinct discourses, practices, and logics of counting civic action; and also how these respond to democratic anxieties about the mass.

The organization of this project into case studies rests on a set of contentions about calls to be counted. First, these calls are contingent articulations that are best explored by looking at the discourses in and around particular calls to be counted at different times and places. Disputes over what counts as public opinion, what constitutes ideal civic participation, and what various forms of aggregation might represent are manifest not just in scholarly debates, but also in political discourse. Does attendance at a rally mean something different than signing a petition or clicking a mouse? As scholars of citizenship argue, distinct practices of civic life provide different visions of the individual’s relationship to the whole.⁸⁴ I have selected case studies that engage with a different form of counting – from petitions, a mass letter campaign, rallies, and digital systems.

Second, aggregate civic actions, while a regular part of American democratic history, are not self-evident expressions of what it means to be part of a collective citizenry or a nation. Counts of citizens in mass campaigns often masquerade as having a sort of objective meaning,

⁸³ John Gerring, “What is a Case Study and What Is It Good for?” *The American Political Science Review* 98 (2004): 341-354.

⁸⁴ Allen, *Talking to Strangers*, 17; Michael Shudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Russell Sage, 1999), 6-9.

and an obvious instrumental function. A million people signing a petition often seems to be an empirical statement, and appeals to scale seem to be obvious ways to gain attention or demonstrate the importance of an issue. But how many citizens need to be counted to warrant our attention or speak to our collective concerns as a public? Moreover, do these movements want attention, or a change in policy, or do they see the movement as a representation of collective opinion at all? The case studies in this dissertation, explore these questions. To further understand the scope of the rhetoric of counting, I have chosen cases that have different exigencies and goals. I have included case studies with explicit policy outcomes, but have also a campaign centered on building community identity to better understand the range of civic discourses of counting.

Third, these articulations of collective action and identity often come up against democratic anxieties about what it means to be represented as part of a whole. Citizens worry about being merely a number or being part of a mass. Questions of how many citizens must be counted, and in what way, invite still more: who signs petitions or attends rallies, and how much do they know or even care about the issue? To what extent are they concerned with self-interest, or group interest, or something more like the public interest? These anxieties however, are dependent not just on the form of counting, but in how those counts are represented and the subsequent claims about American democracy that emerge. Representations of counts of citizens do not always include homogeneity, nor do they always reject the personal. Drawing inspiration from Herbst's study of public opinion and policy, I aim to study the arguments about each campaign in order to understand the assumptions about democracy through the arguments they make about what methods best provide an understanding of the whole.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Herbst, *Numbered Voices*, 21.

In order to be attentive to the contextual nature of these discourses, each case study explores how specific groups have variously responded to the challenges of civic counting in different geographic, historical, and cultural context. The contingency of these arguments, moreover, means that they are best understood through representative anecdotes that provide a consistent vision of what it means to be counted. The focus on a specific set of texts as representative of counting in these movements does provide some limitations. This dissertation focuses heavily on the discourses of movement leaders. However, I argue that a close study of how citizens ask to be counted, and the discourses in which they are represented as a number to negotiate authority, are necessarily a study of prominent voices. For the vast majority of the twentieth century, the campaigns in which citizens are counted involve significant resources, both organizational and financial, and often require access to a platform to reach the public. I aim to be self-conscious about these absences. As a scholar of citizenship, I am particularly attentive to where the process of counted might reinforce or introduce exclusions.

Fourth, rhetorical concepts already offer a use starting vocabulary that can help us arrive at an understanding of the discourse of counting. Of particular use is the Aristotelian concept of *megethos*, or magnitude, which Thomas Farrell argues is central to understanding rhetoric. He defines rhetoric as the “fine and useful art of making things matter” and argues that magnitude is the primary means of establishing the importance, or what he calls the “weight” of rhetoric.⁸⁶ Magnitude is concerned with “a sort of inventional logic for what sort of perspective is needed to size up and take in actions and events of a certain magnitude.”⁸⁷ Magnitude’s concern for an evaluation of degree, or quantity or volume as a way to lay claim to the relative significance of

⁸⁶ Thomas Farrell, “The Weight of Rhetoric: Studies in Cultural Delirium,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 41, no. 4 (2008), 470.

⁸⁷ Thomas Farrell, “Sizing Things Up,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 41, no. 4 (1998), 7.

issues in public life and is a productive avenue for exploring the rhetoric of counting.⁸⁸

Magnitude provides a vocabulary for counting, in particular, size, quantity, and degree. I use quantity to refer to numerical representation and the related focus on size as aggregate. Similarly, degree helps describe terms that focus on the relative size or impact, including Rice's concern for the idea of "scale" or "scaling up," which should be distinguished from a focus on "great size" more characteristic of the aggregate (size or volume).⁸⁹ Magnitude also offers a series of other rhetorical strategies that often describe or are paired with the rhetoric of counting. These include accumulation, repetition, and elaborate description.⁹⁰

In each case study, I draw broader conclusions by asking three key research questions that animate this dissertation. First, how do different groups justify participation in the campaign through some form of counting (e.g., public opinion, collective identity, a demand)? I examine how these texts articulate what it means to be counted as one among many in a mass campaign, and/or as part of a collective citizenry more broadly, as well as why being counted matters at all. Second, how do these calls negotiate the opportunities and constraints of cultural discourses and anxieties about democratic aggregation? Third, what rhetorical strategies or figures emerge that might help us understand how the discourses of counting function persuasively?

⁸⁸ Farrell, "The Weight of Rhetoric," 471. Magnitude is not necessary quantitative in nature or in strategy, but many of the pairs Farrell chooses to in what he calls the "grammar of magnitude" invariably describe the use of counting in public discourse, from more and less, to totality and partiality, or enlarge and diminish, or gigantic and mini.

⁸⁹ Jenny Rice, "The Rhetorical Aesthetics of More: On Archival Magnitude," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 50, no. 1 (2017), 41. Rice troubles the often implicit link between magnitude and scale, and assumption that an emphasis on *more* necessarily also involves an attempt to scale up, to refer to a whole of some kind beyond the accumulated piece. By degree, I mean to invoke the same distinction of "relative size" vs the "great size" that would be more characteristic of the aggregate or quantity.

⁹⁰ These strategies emerge from *amplification*, which Jasinski offers as closely related if not essentially the same as magnitude. Stec offers description as a key feature of citizen debates about war statistics. w Jaisnki

We begin in chapter 2 with the paper petition. Petitions were a prominent tactic at the turn of the twentieth century. They have frequently served as a way that citizens demand action from their government and even lay claim to citizenship.⁹¹ This chapter orients around calls to participate in the National American Woman's Suffrage Association's "big petition" campaign between 1908 and 1912. The campaign sought to reinvigorate suffragists – during a perceived lull in both legislative successes and in enthusiasm – through an unprecedented call for a million signatures. However, this call took place in the midst of a prominent series of arguments with anti-suffragists about who and what should be counted in democratic decision-making. I orient this chapter on three exemplars of this debate, a series of published letters and pamphlets by prominent British anti-suffragist, Mary Ward, and American suffragists Julia Ward Howe and Alice Stone Blackwell. Anti-suffragists at the turn of the century increasingly argued that "all women" needed to want the right to vote in order for suffragist's calls to vote to have political legitimacy. Suffragists, in turn, developed an ironic appeal for a movement that sought to be counted through the vote: they determined that not all citizens should count. In comparing all suffragists to anti-suffragists, from votes for state amendments for suffrage, to membership in organizations, to petition campaigns, Blackwell and Howe made concrete their claims that what mattered were active citizens rather than broad concerns for public opinion.

In chapter 3, I turn to letters as a means of counting citizen opinions. This chapter follows President Franklin Roosevelt's calls for citizens to send letters from 1934-1937 in the midst of his re-election campaign. I turn to these letters to understand how presidential negotiations of public opinion shape and constrain citizen's capacity to understand and debate how they are

⁹¹ Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship*, 181-184. Zaeske provides a brief summary of a number of petition campaigns. She argues for the continued centrality of petition campaigns for women participation in politics, and the suffrage campaign in particular.

counted. Presidents regularly invoke the public to justify support for particular policies, but also as Jeffrey Drury argues, present the public as a demand on the office that must be attended to.⁹² As one of the most popular presidential recipients of letters, Roosevelt is a key figure to study; indeed, his presidency marks a shift in the popularity of the practice.⁹³ At the same time, Roosevelt developed one of the earliest and most expansive polling enterprises to systematize the nations' attitudes, techniques he applied to the letter campaign even as he publicly expressed suspicion for mass letter campaigns for their superficial contributions.⁹⁴ In this analysis, I draw upon two of Roosevelt's famous "fireside chat" radio addresses in which he sought to encourage citizens to send letters, a popular magazine article from presidential secretary Louis Howe, and Republican criticisms of FDR's letter-processing procedures to consider what it meant to be counted through a letter in 1930s America. I argue that letters to the White House were framed as both expressions of an aggregate public will and also of the authentic and personal relationship between the president and citizens. In calling for letters from citizens, Roosevelt used letters to affirm the effective and efficient agency of government and to strengthen his presidency as a means of personally channeling the voice of the people.

Next, in chapter 4, I explore a historic rally on the Washington Mall, considering the role of materiality and spirituality in the politics of counting.⁹⁵ I analyze the controversial 1995 Million Man March, and the calls to be counted by its figurehead, Louis Farrakhan, leader of the

⁹² Jeffrey Mehlretter Drury, *Speaking with the People's Voice: How President's Invoke Opinion* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 9.

⁹³ Alfred B. Rollins, "Young FDR and the Moral Crusaders," *New York History* 37 (1956): 3.

⁹⁴ Melvin G. Holli, *The Wizard of Washington: Emil Hurja, Franklin Roosevelt and the Birth of Public Opinion Polling* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 39; Mary Stuckey, *Voting Deliberatively: FDR and the 1936 Presidential Campaign* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 27.

⁹⁵ Franklyn S. Haiman "The Rhetoric of the Streets: Some Legal and Ethical Considerations," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 53 (1967): 99-100.

Nation of Islam. Much of the lead up to the march was focused on the distance, or lack thereof, between the message of the march and Farrakhan himself.⁹⁶ In turn, Farrakhan sought to reinforce his own authority. I examine Farrakhan's public calls for mass attendance prior to the march, particularly in the announcement of the march in the Nation of Islam newspaper, *Final Call*, and then turn to his keynote speech during the march. I show that Farrakhan drew a great deal of inspiration from the civic myths and materiality of nation-making central to the Washington Mall. The national mall has often been a site in which Americans learn who they are as citizens, but also where citizens, and particularly African Americans, have gathered to contest these visions.⁹⁷ Farrakhan's unique brand of numerology focused on divining the secrets of the memorials on the national mall to transform its civic history into a distinctly African American history. Farrakhan's numerology culminates in what is for him the most important number, the number *one*, which engenders a transformation into "one" nation. In doing so, Farrakhan conveys the whole, the one, as something far more than the sum of its parts. Farrakhan counts to reveal, and to create the black nation within the American nation.

Chapter 5 culminates in a study of web-based systems of counting through the online petition. This case study focuses on MoveOn.org's landmark 1998 "Censure Clinton and Move On" campaign. In 1998, President Bill Clinton faced impeachment proceedings for, among other charges, lying under oath about an affair with Monica Lewinsky. To counter the impeachment, MoveOn founders Joan Blades and Wes Boyd developed a web petition to gather signatures to

⁹⁶ John L. Pauley II, "Reshaping Public Persona and the Prophetic Ethos: Louis Farrakhan at the Million Man March," *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 4 (1998): 512. Pauley argues these debates focused on "uncoupling" the message and the messenger. My analysis shows an attempt to distance Farrakhan from the scale of the march as well.

⁹⁷ Charles Green and Basil Wilson, "Marches on Washington and the Black Protest Movement," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 16, no. 3 (2007), 201; Lucy G. Barber, *Marching on Washington: The Forging of an American Political Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 5.

“censure” Clinton and “move on” to more important national and political issues. The petition would quickly help build MoveOn into a prominent advocacy organization. MoveOn’s 1998 petition campaign is a key moment to study the early history of a new technology’s use in politics. Damian Pfister argues such moments help establish the norms of engagement.⁹⁸ I analyze the MoveOn website over the course of the first six months of its campaign, from September 1998 to February 1999. The sheer prevalence of “counts” on MoveOn.org—from counts of petition signers to downloads of a web banner—helped MoveOn portray “digital activism” as comprised of short but intense moments of focused action by citizens in a loose alliance. The numerous counts and use of percentages and ratios were meant to demonstrate, as Blades repeatedly suggested, that the internet could be a means of activating a new American consensus in an era typified by partisan political fracture.

In my analysis, I find that arguments about what it means to be counted are shaped by the specifics of the contexts, issues, and technologies of counting. Central to these distinct arguments about counting is the concern for what is being counted by the campaign. These discourses are variously concerned with what the “whole” of the campaign might represent, from public opinion, to votes or decisions on an issue, to demands on the government, or moral commitments. Similarly, they offer different claims as to what extent participants in a campaign might speak to the whole of the public, be it quantity, degree, or aggregates; or whether that “whole” public matters at all. Taken together, these four case studies show that claims to represent the public through counting inevitably require broader arguments about counting in democracy. In particular, concerns for who should be counted in public decision making in the nation, and who should do the counting. Finally, how these movements count citizens can be

⁹⁸ Damian Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics: Attention and Deliberation in the Early Blogosphere* (University Park, Penn State University Press, 2014), 6.

explained by rhetorical strategies of magnitude, including accumulation, repetition, and elaborate description.

Conclusion

In this introduction, I have argued that aggregate practices of democracy have long been justified and debated in public discourse in ways that merit scholarly attention. I have suggested that public opinion scholarship shows that public opinion is a contested construct that is often expressed as part of broader political arguments. The same can be said of other forms of public “counting.” Studies of citizenship provide conceptual grounding in how collective identities and ties that are authorized by citizenship result both from numerical representations in civic discourse and the performance of aggregative civic rituals. Taken together, I argue that a more complete picture of democratic life would emerge from consideration of how citizens express and reject calls to be counted through both institutional statistics and their own aggregate campaigns. There is, in short, nothing straightforward about the rhetoric of counting.

I have briefly illustrated that counting has been part of the practice of everyday democracy and the aspirations of citizens that ranges from arguments to participate in petition campaigns, gain access to voting, and demonstrate the force and visibility of rallies. In the chapters that follow, I analyze how calls to be counted negotiate the anxieties about the majority, about homogeneity, and about citizenship in democracy. All together, these chapters illustrate how the question of what it means to be counted is central to the construction of authority in mass democracy.

CHAPTER 2: “THE PUBLIC SPIRITED MINORITY”: COUNTING INTENSITY IN THE NATIONAL AMERICAN WOMAN SUFFRAGE ASSOCIATION 1908-1912

Harriet Stanton Blatch succinctly described the state of the woman’s suffrage movement¹ at the turn of the 20th century in this way: “we were told to organize, organize, organize, to the end educating, educating, educating public opinion.”² Stanton Blatch, the daughter of notable suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, returned to the United States from England in 1902 to a movement she proclaimed to be “completely in a rut.”³ She argued in her memoirs that suffrage organizing—driven largely by the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA)—displayed a lack of foresight about the methods for attaining suffrage because of the same “old” focus on “educating, educating, educating.” The movement, she continued, “bored its adherents and repelled its opponents. Most of the ammunition was being wasted on its supporters in private drawing rooms and in public halls where friends, drummed up and harried by the ardent, listlessly heard the same old argument.”⁴ In the eyes of many, the movement had stagnated; it needed the means to attract new membership while pacifying the old.

Eleanor Flexner’s foundational account of the American women’s suffrage movement places Stanton Blatch within a growing push from younger suffragists, who were heavily influenced by the English movement’s turn to tactics of agitation over education.⁵ The new generation pushed for marches and other public demonstrations. At the same time, suffragists

¹ Like most suffragists, Blatch refers to “woman” suffrage, which I do here, but I change to the modern usage of “women’s suffrage” throughout.

² Harriet Stanton Blatch and Alma Lutz, *Challenging Years: The Memoirs of Harriet Stanton Blatch* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1940), 92.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle: The Woman’s Rights Movement in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1959), 243.

were facing new forms of resistance as lawmakers and anti-suffragists increasingly argued that “all women” needed to want suffrage for their cause to be legitimate. In the midst of this opposition, suffragists introduced a new national petition campaign for a million signatures at the NAWSA Annual Convention in October 1908, which would demonstrate for the cause. Yet, even as suffragists argued for mass participation in the “big petition,” they also began to debate the merits of prioritizing the quantity of women’s support for suffrage over the intensity of activist commitments. Prominent suffragists increasingly refuted claims that “all women” needed to support suffrage, using a number of speeches, columns, and pamphlets to argue that the opinions of the broader public were not as important as the public actions of suffragists.

In this chapter, I analyze how suffragists’ conflicted calls to be counted navigated anxieties about mass democracy by engaging in debates over what counts as actionable beliefs and sentiments of the public. I begin my analysis by identifying the rhetorical strategies around counting from anti-suffragists. I argue these strategies offered opportunities for suffragists to co-opt anti-suffragist arguments in their favor. To do so, I analyze a highly contentious 1908 letter by Mary Ward, a British novelist and founder of the Woman’s National Anti-Suffrage League. Ward’s letter is an exemplar of anti-suffrage arguments that not “all women” supported suffrage and thus the movement was invalid. I then turn to two of the most prominent suffrage responses to Ward’s not “all women” arguments: a 1908 letter responding directly to Ward by Julia Ward Howe, and a popular pamphlet by young suffrage upstart Alice Stone Blackwell called *When All Women Want It*, which was circulated by NAWSA in 1910. Finally, I return to NAWSA calls to be counted at the start of the “big petition” campaign from 1908 to 1910, analyzing repeated rhetorical strategies in newspapers, public letters, and speeches. My aim in this chapter is not to provide a comprehensive account of the strategies for discussing the petition campaign, but

rather to identify exemplars of a few prominent patterns that offer a comparison to Howe and Blackwell's arguments about "all women."

I argue that Howe and Blackwell invoked counting to advance a view of public opinion that drew away from majoritarian logics to instead focus on *discrete civic actions*—which Howe and Blackwell argue can be counted—rather than a more amorphous and uncountable sense of majority opinion. Ironically, Howe and Blackwell limited who should be counted to "those who care," or those who *vote*, instead of the "whole" of the population. Even if there were a silent majority of women who opposed suffrage, they should not count. Analyzing suffrage debates over civic counting demonstrates how arguments about what measures best represent public opinion or public actions inevitably become much larger debates about how democracy should work. This chapter thus introduces a key debate in civic counting: *who gets counted* in American democracy?

In turn, suffragists deployed rhetorical strategies of *magnitude* to make claims about the *degree* and *quantity* of support for suffrage as compared to anti-suffrage. Suffragists contrasted counts of civic activities for and against suffrage represented as a simple quantity against representations of these activities as percentages and ratios to emphasize the degree, thus adding weight to their claims of majority representation. The *repetition* and *accumulation* of these quantities—strategies of magnitude—served not only to provide further proof of the majority, but also to amplify the idea of a majority. Suffragists created this repetition through the separation of quantities into time and space, creating the impression of pockets of intense belief and action for suffrage.

From “Too Many” to Not Enough

Early petition campaigns played an important role for women suffragists, enabling women’s participation in the public sphere, particularly as part of women’s political advocacy beginning with 1820s abolitionism.⁶ This participation, however, often required substantial justification.⁷ Alisse Portnoy argues, for example, that women who petitioned against the removal of Native American populations in the 1830s framed their signatures as an extraordinary act commensurate with the moral significance of Native American removals.⁸ Susan Zaeske argues that 1840s women’s abolitionist petitions helped develop a political identity for women as citizens.⁹ In providing their signatures, women asserted their citizenship in the only way they were allowed. These efforts, among others, slowly eroded the prohibition of women from public life.

Woman suffragists at the turn of the century faced opposition that was rooted in long-standing anxieties about both gender and democracy. The push for suffrage inevitably stirred up concerns about the wisdom, or lack thereof, of the “masses.” NAWSA President Carrie Chapman Catt described the opposition to women’s suffrage as a belief that “too many people are voting already.”¹⁰ At the turn of the century, the common refrain about the masses was that they lacked the literacy skills necessary to vote wisely. Suffragists responded by turning to what Aileen Kraditor calls “expediency claims,” which reaffirmed the importance of voter qualifications so

⁶ Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, 77.

⁷ Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning and Antislavery, & Women's Political Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁸ Alisse Portnoy, *Their Right to Speak: Women's Activism in the Indian and Slave Debate* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁹ Susan Zaeske, “Signatures of Citizenship: The Rhetoric of Women’s Antislavery Petitions,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 2 (2002), 149.

¹⁰ Carrie Chapman Catt, “President’s Annual Address,” *National American Woman Suffrage Association Convention* (Washington DC, National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1904), 3.

that potential women voters who met them could be included, and those who were undesirable voters could be excluded.¹¹ In turn, suffragists embraced the racism, classism, and xenophobia that often drove anxieties about the masses.¹² Many of these same voices, however, also regularly decried the sad showing at the polls. As Blackwell noted in her pamphlet, “so many men stay away from the polls that every year a bill is introduced in some State Legislature to impose penalties on men who neglect to vote.”¹³ On the surface, the concern for a lack of voters seemed to contradict the anxieties about “too many” voters. However, the belief that “too many people are voting” had always been more about “too many” of the “wrong” people voting.

In the early 20th century, arguments that women lacked the proper educational qualifications for the vote were superseded by the claim that women lacked another more important quality: the *desire* to vote. Opponents of women’s suffrage noted that some women clearly desired to vote, but they went on to argue that the *majority* of women did not. Alice Stone Blackwell lamented that these pleas for “all women to want [suffrage]” were overused arguments that the opposition predictably revisited. An article in *The Suffragist* described such arguments as

¹¹ Aileen Kraditor, *The Ideas of the Woman Suffrage Movement, 1890–1920* (New York: Norton, 1981), 2. In her Presidential Address to NAWSA in 1904, for example, Catt provides a litany of statistics about male and female literacy rates to show that there were a great number of well-educated women that had the proper qualifications to vote, but that there were also populations of both men and women that lacked these qualities.

¹² Sarah Hunter Graham, *Women Suffrage and the New Democracy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 4; Louise Newman, “Reflections On Aileen Kraditor’s Legacy: Fifty Years Of Woman Suffrage Historiography, 1965– 2014,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 14 (2015): 307–308. Newman provides a helpful update for Kraditor’s foundational account of what she calls a shift to “expediency,” claims which often saw suffragists cultivate racism to argue for the (white) women vote. Though this shift proves overstated with the emergence of more documentary evidence, these arguments, and certainly the racism in the movement were prevalent.

¹³ Alice Stone Blackwell, *When All Women Want It* (New York: National American Woman Suffrage Association, 1912), 1.

an “armor plate” for legislators, but celebrated that the efforts of suffragists into the 1910s had finally begun to “rust” the armor.¹⁴

Refuting the idea that a majority of women needed to want suffrage was made more changing by the general perception that suffrage advocacy was in decline. Suffragists adopted the term “doldrums,” to describe the common view of depressed enthusiasm and activism at the turn of the 20th century.¹⁵ These doldrums were certainly reflected in Stanton Blatch’s lament about “educating, educating, educating.” Historian Sarah Hunter compellingly argues that the “doldrums” of the movement were exaggerated in historical accounts that focused largely on white women’s organizations on the east coast.¹⁶ Nevertheless, arguments that the movement was experiencing a decline were rife in public discourse at the time. Anti-suffragists identified this decline in a number of measures including votes, legislative achievements, and membership. These measures bolstered arguments that women lacked the desire to vote.

The Private Opposition

In July 1908, Mary Ward, an anti-suffragist activist, published a column in the *London Times* asking “Is Woman Suffrage Inevitable?”¹⁷ Her answer—an emphatic *no*—offered a less than flattering assessment of the suffrage movement in the United States. Ward’s screed in the *London Times* prompted a flurry of responses from suffragists. What set her argument apart from the regular old “armor plate” was her quantification of the suffrage and anti-suffrage movements,

¹⁴ “The Will of the People,” *The Suffragist*, May 16, 1914. The article in question focuses specifically on a May 1914 parade as evidence of such a rust.

¹⁵ Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, 248.

¹⁶ Graham, *Women Suffrage*, 4-5. Graham focuses on women’s organizations in the west to suggest that suffrage activism during this period.

¹⁷ Mary A. Ward, “Is Woman Suffrage Inevitable,” *London Times*, June 30, 1908. In subsequent response, Ward often used her husband’s name Mrs. Humphry Ward.

which she claimed showed the movement was in decline. Ward's arguments were grounded in two ways of counting suffrage and anti-suffrage movements. First, Ward used accumulation to showcase the numerous defeats of suffrage votes at the turn of the century. Second, Ward utilized the discourses of *scale* to contextualize the long time frame and substantial labor of the suffrage movement to argue that the four states that granted suffrage prior to 1909 represent meager gains in comparison to the outsized impacts of anti-suffragists. The implications of Ward's strategies placed substantial emphasis on the question of *who* counts, where Ward argues that to take into account "all women" would reveal a "quiet majority" of women who were against suffrage.

First, to provide evidence of the decline of the suffrage movement, Ward listed failed state amendments for suffrage and even the more modest amendments for school-suffrage (which allowed women to vote in school district elections). Her list began with:

Since 1896, indeed, in five states the suffrage Constitutional amendments have been defeated at the polls, and in 1903 the Legislatures of 13 States rejected Woman Suffrage bills of one type or another. School-suffrage has been secured off women in 25 States, but the striking thing is that the suffrage agitation and the 'unwise pressure brought to bear on Legislatures and public officials' has hindered the natural progress of women in the field of work so well suited to them. In two States—Connecticut and Ohio—the abolition of the school suffrage has actually been discussed. School-suffrage votes have been defeated in five States in the last three years, and a Bill 'requiring that at least one-third of the members of boards of education appointed by mayors should be women was defeated in New York in 1899.

Looking at the years since 1896, Ward constructed a trend by providing a long list of defeats. Ward used the rhetorical strategy of *accumulatio*, long lists of examples to add emphasis. Counting the five states with defeated amendments, the 13 states that rejected suffrage, and the five failures in school-suffrage all in a row, drove home the “decline” Ward argued for. By presenting the defeats in short episodes of time, Ward was able to create a lengthy list of evidence of declining enthusiasm through the failed votes.

Still, the arguments here shared no consistent timeline. For example the failed votes for constitutional amendment required a calculation in the years since “1896,” while the “13 states” that “rejected Woman Suffrage bills” were attached to a specific year, “1903.” The “school-suffrage” defeats were given a three-year time frame before 1908. These defeats, however, had an unclear relationship with the “25 states” that had secured school-suffrage, which received no specific timeframe. Indeed, Ward rarely attached specific dates or time frames to the successes of the movement. For example, in the lack of such detail provided for the four states that passed suffrage amendments. Arguably more damning was Ward’s lack of consistency in determining these counts. She argued that it was not men being counted, but *women*. However, the defeat of many of these measures would have likely rested on the votes of men. Nevertheless, Ward’s argument was effective enough in its imprecision. Rhetorically, it was less about chronology than it was about litany.

Ward was not concerned with the linear chronology from 1896 to 1908 in which suffrage experienced the litany of defeats. And yet, she was concerned with the chronology of suffrage organizing as a whole. In the “60 years of agitation” beginning with Seneca Falls Convention, Ward argued, the mere “four” states that had granted suffrage over a sixty-year period clearly showed that women’s suffrage was waning. The length of time provided a scale by which to

measure the accomplishments of the movement. Ward granted that the “second-third of the 19th century” (the 1830s to 1860s) witnessed a degree of success and enthusiasm for women’s suffrage, but these victories were long behind the movement. In turn, Ward portrayed the resolute work of suffragists over 60 years as a weakness in the movement. The minimal gains in amendments or school suffrage were of little value in the context of the scale of time in which they were achieved. In contrast, the “recent” period post 1896 showcased a litany of defeats for suffragists.

Ward used the recent defeats of suffrage amendments to argue against any and all progressive narratives for suffrage advocacy. Instead, the slow progress was portrayed as the movement’s largest weakness. Ward argued that suffragists relied on a mistaken belief in progress. Ward noted that suffragists and anti-suffragists alike seemed to believe that “when, in a democratic country a claim of this kind has been asserted sufficiently long and with sufficient vehemence, mere clamor and insistence wear down opposition.” Ward denied that suffragists would see progress simply because of the length of time the movement persisted. Ward thus challenged any view that suffrage was “inevitable,” historically or otherwise. As such, she challenged ideas about the “progressive” nature of *history* as it applied to suffrage.

Second, Ward argued that the litany of suffrage defeats was the result of the counter-work of anti-suffragists. She credited the anti-suffragists with revealing lack of public support for suffrage and driving down enthusiasm in the early 1900s, which had “defeated the woman suffrage movement.” She contrasted the great amount of labor by suffragists with the comparatively small efforts of anti-suffragists, building on the minimal success of the suffrage movement over time to showcase the outsized impact of anti-suffragists. The anti-suffrage movement began, she argued, “by quiet opposition through petitions and personal pleas,” but

“year by year the movement grew,” to become a “quiet, resolute, and slowly strengthening opposition.” Notably, she did little to explicitly quantify the anti-suffrage movement outside of the “thousands” of documents produced. Ultimately, Ward argued that small pockets of active anti-suffragists were all that was needed to send women’s suffrage to the doldrums.

Finally, Ward argued the “quiet” and “private” anti-suffragists outnumbered the suffragists. *Women*, not men, represented the primary opposition to the inevitability of suffrage. Paradoxically she argued that anti-suffragists could not be objectively counted even as she counted them: she wrote of the “preponderating number of the women who refuse to petition at all in either direction.” Indeed, women had chosen to “use their influence to strengthen the vote of men.” Women who opposed the vote were the majority, she suggested, but they could not be counted. To be publicly counted would be to violate the very principle of their opposition that a woman’s place was not in public. Ward thus argued that while suffragists might appear larger in quantity, it was the “quiet majority” of anti-suffragists that were “more passionate,” and far more effective. Such claims, though slippery, were particularly vexing for suffragists. Ward created a significant challenge for suffragists: how do you count women who do not show up in public to be counted?

Counting Women Who Participate in Public

Suffragists sent bunches of letters responding to Ward to a variety of British and American publications from July to October 1908 when NAWSA held its annual convention to announce the “big petition.”¹⁸ Julia Ward Howe wrote one of the more prominent responses to

¹⁸ See for example, Alice Stone Blackwell, “Mrs Humphry Ward on Suffrage in America,” *Woman’s Journal*, July 18, 1908; Millicent Fawcett, “Woman Suffrage,” *The London Times*, July 2, 1908; Anna Howard Shaw, “To the Editor of the Times,” *The London Times*, July 8, 1908; Harriet Stanton Blatch, “Mrs. Blatch on Mrs. Ward,” *The Woman’s Journal*, July 25, 1908.

Ward in a letter published in the *London Times* in October 1908, copied in full in the primary NAWSA newsletter, *The Woman's Journal*, as well as excerpted in a number of regional publications, and widely quoted in NAWSA pamphlets.¹⁹ In response to Ward's claims about the "quiet" majority of anti-suffrage women, Howe asked what we should consider the "whole" against which suffrage should be measured? Ward's "all women," became in Howe's arguments, "all women who demonstrate an opinion by means of participation in suffrage activities on either side."²⁰ Howe's argument hinged on a concern for the intensity of pro-suffrage participation contrasted with that of the anti-suffragist efforts. She used two primary strategies to demonstrate the intensity of the pro-suffrage movement: representing the scope of the movement in the range of suffrage activities, and by dividing these counts in specific spaces, namely in cities or states. In both, Howe compared counts of pro- and anti- suffrage activities to demonstrate the intensity of suffrage and the relative paucity of the anti-suffrage efforts.

Howe opened her response by taking issue with Ward's characterization of the suffrage movement as in decline. Recalling the "second third of the century" Ward attributed this success to, Howe states, "I well remember, the movement was small and unpopular, and the object of unlimited ridicule." Instead of being in decline, Howe argued, suffrage organizations "[had] grown steadily in numbers and strength ever since." Howe argued that Ward's vision of recent failures was inaccurate, just like her false depiction of the early advances of the movement. For example, Howe emphasized the growth in membership of NAWSA, and how the "annual income

¹⁹ Julia Ward Howe, "Mrs. Howe Answers Mrs. Humphry Ward," *Woman's Journal*, August 1, 1908, 121.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

[of the organization] had risen from 2,544 in 1892 to 25,662 in 1907.”²¹ The metrics of income and membership provided a way to counter Ward’s narrative with quantitative detail.

Howe set out to further dispute Ward’s narrative of decline. To do so, she focused on precise comparisons of all measure of *activities* for or against suffrage, from petition signatures, membership, organizational income, and votes. Howe directly contrasted counts of pro-suffrage membership or activities directly against the same measure in anti-suffrage groups. She utilized this same comparison for the production of literature: where “the women’s anti-suffrage movement in American maintains only one small four-page quarterly as its mouthpiece; the woman suffrage movement maintains one weekly paper and seven monthlies.” These comparisons took a fairly typical form in much of the letter, emphasizing specific quantities segmented by geographic space. For example, Howe brought up the “constitutional Convention in New York” where “the suffragists secured more than 30,000 signatures to their petitions,” and immediately turned to “the anti-suffragists,” who could only produce “15,000.”²² These comparisons of counts portrayed the strength of the suffrage movement against the anti-suffrage efforts.

To reinforce the arguments about the differences in degree of support, Howe provided a long list of suffrage movement activities to out-accumulate Ward, in order to further demonstrate the importance of the majority support for suffrage. Howe followed the pattern of comparing suffrage and anti-suffrage metrics, providing a long list that served to reinforce her claims about the popularity of the suffrage movement. The anti-suffrage quarterly, Howe suggested, included a list that showed “state anti-suffrage associations exist in only four out of the 46 states of the Union, and small anti-suffrage ‘committees’ in four more. On the other hand, Woman Suffrage

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 3.

Associations exist in 33 states and several territories.” She added further contrasting measures: the number of local branches in New York State (4 anti-suffrage to 125 suffrage), and Massachusetts (38 to 111), then transitioning to petition signatures for suffrage presented at the constitutional convention in Michigan (13,000 to 175,000) and then to the organizations working for a city charter to give women the ballot in Chicago (1 to 97).²³ This list of counts displayed the vast difference in scale between the membership and actions of suffrage organizations and those of anti-suffrage. Using space not only created quantities that could be accumulated, but also helped to make the significance of the suffrage activities vivid and concrete, and a clear measure of public attitudes about suffrage. If the individual comparisons make the relative popularity concrete, then the list of activities by which this can be measured only further emphasized the intensity of the suffragists.

In addition to the range of activities, Howe supported her arguments about the popularity of the suffrage movement by showcasing the breadth of influence of the movement across many states. What mattered, Howe argued, was the size, scope, and level of activity of the suffrage organization. For example, to count petitions to the Chicago charter, Howe made a point to quantify the signatures (10,000) obtained and the number of organizations that advanced the campaign (97) in contrast to the sole anti-suffrage organization that opposed.²⁴ Howe used this methodology of quantifying “members and strengths” to refute Ward’s claims and also turn the tables on her questioning anti-suffrage numbers. The strength of the movement could be found with the clusters of activities, members and/or organizations in spaces that spanned the country. Furthermore, the concentrated clusters reflected the intensity of the movement, and it was this

²³ Ibid., 2.

²⁴ Ibid.

intensity to be counted that would play a large part in the ultimate success for the women's suffrage movement.

Howe therefore argued that organization and activities were the best measure of the intensity of commitment in a geographic area. Her emphasis on intensity as a measure of counting was even clearer in her disparagement of anti-suffrage membership. While contrasting suffrage and anti-suffrage numbers, Howe made an important argument about what should reasonably be included in these counts. Howe used the example of the Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to discuss what can be counted as membership. Howe argued that members of that anti-suffrage association "pay no dues," contrasting this to the suffrage associations that did pay dues. She then proceeded to unpack the "14,000 members" they claim, a number she found overstated. Howe argued that the "so-called members" had only "sign[ed] an anti-suffrage document," and that "those who signed many years ago are still counted." She concluded, "the statement that they have collected 14,000 members merely means that in 13 years they have collected 14,000 signatures." Howe went on to contrast this to the Constitutional Convention in Michigan, where suffragists "collected 175,000 signatures to their petitions in a few months."²⁵ For Howe this was an excellent counterpoint to Ward's contention of a suffragist decline over time, and it was a means to compare two distinct locales (in Michigan and Massachusetts) as a function of activity level, thereby quantifying membership between suffragists and anti-suffragists.

Howe's arguments sought to demonstrate the significance of suffrage organizing capability. "In most of the States where defeats [of woman suffrage bills] had taken place," Howe argued, "there was no anti-suffrage organization of women at all." Howe contended that

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

this was because suffragists required more commitment from their members. In addition to dues, membership cards, and petition signatures, there was the more significant work of canvassing and letter writing. The passion and dedication of members in such efforts was a key way of demonstrating the “public sentiment,” and a means for Howe to counter Ward’s argument that anti-suffragists had to exert little or no effort to “drive” the defeats of suffrage amendments.

Howe’s emphasis on labor and effort also set the boundaries for what could be measured as the “whole” through which the American people could then determine public action and public sentiment about suffrage. To demonstrate the “whole,” Howe added one last measure: “in Maine, Iowa, Kansas—in short, wherever women have sent to the Legislature petitions for suffrage and remonstrances against it, the petitioner has always outnumbered the remonstrant 50 or 100 to one.”²⁶ The “whole” that really counted, she argued, was not an elusive “public opinion,” but rather the quantity of suffragist women who had petitioned, and subsequently, the *degree* of support this represented in the ratio. In this regard, suffragists far outnumbered anti-suffragists.

At the close of her litany of counts, Howe argued that the real issue was *who* should be counted. In a quotation that circulated widely in suffrage literature, Howe wrote “in America, most women are still indifferent on the question of suffrage; but, of those who take any lively interest in it either way, the vast majority are in favor. This has been demonstrated wherever the matter has been brought to the test.” Howe used this argument to address the indifference of most women in America on the question of women’s suffrage. She argued that suffragists, politicians, and the public should concern themselves not with all women, but with the

²⁶ Ibid.

dedication and intensity of the women who weighed in and took part.²⁷ The answer to Howe's question of how to count women who did not show up in public was to dismiss them from concern. Howe had encapsulated a new view of counting for the suffrage movement; the movement no longer needed to count all women, the movement only needed to quantify those that stepped forward to be counted.

The Majority Who Votes

This surprising claim was further polished by Alice Stone Blackwell, who offered a prominent and lengthy expansion on Howe's original letter in a popular pamphlet aptly named *When All Women Want It*. Published by NAWSA in 1910, the pamphlet was reprinted and circulated throughout the decade. In it, Blackwell briefly demonstrated the "lively interest" of suffrage work and reiterated the counts included in Howe's letter. She was, however, far less concerned with demonstrating the scope and intensity of suffrage activities. Blackwell's pamphlet was set against the increased popularity of the claim by anti-suffragists that suffrage could not be legitimately attained "until the majority of women asked for it."²⁸ The call for all women Blackwell argued, led to a push by legislators that amendments for suffrage had to demonstrate a near unanimous majority in a decisive *vote*.

Blackwell argued, "neither all men nor all women have ever been unanimous in wanting anything."²⁹ She disputed the idea of a unanimous vote of all women. Democracy, she argued, had never been driven by *all* but rather by the *majority* of those who vote. Blackwell adopted a new language of the "public spirited minority," to develop an argument based in historical voting

²⁷ Ibid., 2.

²⁸ Blackwell, *When All Women*, 1.

²⁹ Ibid.

patterns.³⁰ First, Blackwell analyzed voting patterns to show the low participation of men, and then provided a number of examples of votes that passed without a majority of eligible voters. Second, she analyzed the ratios of suffrage or school suffrage votes to compare the majority to these successful votes. She argued that democracy has never required a majority of *all* eligible voters, and yet these are the standards to which women were held.

Blackwell went on to place the arguments that “all women” had to vote for suffrage in the context of longstanding challenges of a lack of voter participation in American public life. “It is notorious,” Blackwell declared, “that large numbers of men are indifferent to the right of suffrage.”³¹ This could be proven, she argued, with “published statistics [which] show that, except at Presidential elections, the majority of the men who could register and vote do not generally do so.”³² Blackwell provided a number of examples of such lackluster counts, including “one election in Gosnold, Mass., [where] not a single vote was cast.” She subsequently shifted in space to generate another example of where “the same thing happened in a Michigan township.”³³ These patterns persisted, she argued, in spite of countless efforts to address the lack of enthusiasm. Even with “brass bands, campaign oratory, personal work, and the most fervent of printed appeals,” men regularly did not vote.³⁴ Blackwell applied the standard for “all women” to desire suffrage to men, using voting patterns to illustrate the hypocrisy of the argument. Low participation had not been sufficient cause to take the vote away from the “more public-spirited minority,” even as the majority of men were indifferent.³⁵ She argued the standard for women

³⁰ Ibid., 2.

³¹ Ibid., 1.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.

should reflect the same emphasis on the public spirited minority instead of all women or even a majority of women to vote for suffrage.

In addition to enthusiasm, the existence of the public spirited minority in voting patterns for men demonstrated that a majority of eligible voters had never been required for a successful vote. She demonstrated the low threshold for a majority vote by providing a lengthy example of four constitutional amendments in New York, which passed with a majority of voters. Blackwell presented the vote as a function of percentages she calculated by including the eligible population of voters as the whole. This means that the “successful vote” was achieved when “only about 25 per cent of the voters wanted these changes, while 75 per cent were ‘either indifferent or opposed.’”³⁶ This yes vote appeared well below what sounded like a reasonable majority; and yet, Blackwell added, “since less than 25 per cent of the voters were actually opposed, all the amendments were declared carried.”³⁷ She went on to demonstrate that the “public spirited minority” clearly carries through in the threshold for successful votes and frequently requires only the smallest of margins to achieve a majority. In one case, Blackwell added, “a constitutional amendment had sometimes carried when only 10 per cent of the men in the State voted for it.”³⁸ She expanded on this point, adding that even where the majority only includes voters, “none of these states have ever been able to carry at a general election any amendment” because “a majority of the men voting for Governor do not take the trouble to vote even for the most popular amendment.”³⁹ Based on these voting patterns, Blackwell argued,

³⁶ Ibid., 4.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

there has been a longstanding practice of accepting the opinions of the public spirited minority in American democracy.

Blackwell sought to show that the threshold for “all women” to reach a consensus on suffrage was several orders of magnitude higher than the marginal majorities of male voters. She argued that the question of suffrage also “ought to be decided, as other questions put to vote...by the wish of the majority,” of “those caring enough to vote on it.”⁴⁰ In contrast to the low voting patterns of men, these same calculations in women’s votes on suffrage revealed a very different outcome. For example, Blackwell celebrated the participation of women in the territory of Wyoming was a territory, in which “ninety per cent of them voted” when allowed.⁴¹ Women seem to make much better voters than men.

Blackwell also used percentages to show the majority of women voted for suffrage. She provided a lengthy example of votes from an 1895 Massachusetts suffrage amendment that showed this majority. Blackwell detailed the results, where in “238 out of 322 towns of Massachusetts, not one woman voted no,” and “out of the 575,000 women in the whole State who might have voted in the negative, only 861 did so.”⁴² Not satisfied with these counts, Blackwell went on to reiterate this conclusion by presenting the percentages for the small opposition from 561 women, which amounted to “less than one –sixth of one percent,” or “an average of 26 to 1” by district.⁴³ The use of ratios and percentages helped to drive home what simple counts might not. The conclusion: an overwhelming number of women *voters* supported suffrage. Blackwell quoted Howe, who noted that “it will be said that this did not show the

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 3.

⁴³ Ibid.

whole number of women opposed,” but again argued that “it shows with absolute accuracy the number of those women who opposed, who believed that the right to vote implies the duty.”⁴⁴ Blackwell offered a response to the arguments that suffrage would force unwilling women to vote by noting that the small number showed this was unlikely. The litany of concrete examples of suffrage votes showcased the positive voting patterns of woman suffragists, and the continued unfairness of the outcomes in contrast to the acceptance of the “public spirited minority” by men.

Howe also placed the suffrage votes in the context of eligible populations of men to further demonstrate the challenges of a full majority. If all women needed to desire and vote for suffrage, then what did it mean to have so many men *not* vote? Blackwell again used the example of Massachusetts to draw a direct contrast between the “less than one-sixth of one percent” of women opposed to suffrage against the outcome of the vote determined by men.⁴⁵ She shifted the “whole” from all those who voted to the total population of men, concluding that “two-thirds of the men were either indifferent or in favor,” making the majority that defeated the measure a mere “33 per cent.”⁴⁶ Blackwell, like Ward, could project the views of the general public who had not registered their official opinion. Men who did not vote were “indifferent” and thus could be collapsed with men in favor. Blackwell argued that in spite of the “two-thirds” of men “indifferent or in favor,” the figures were “properly taken as that of the men who cared enough about it to express themselves.”⁴⁷ This, Blackwell argued, was the standard in which “the figures of the women’s vote ought to have been taken.” The women who voted “26 to 1”

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

should “have been taken as equally conclusive.”⁴⁸ By comparing votes to the population, Blackwell demonstrated that the threshold for “all women” to reach a consensus on suffrage was several orders of magnitude higher than typically practiced in American democracy.

In addition to applying the same standard to suffrage votes, Blackwell contrasted the practice of minority votes with an example where a clear majority was unsuccessful. She provided a second lengthy example of a suffrage vote in Wyoming’s statehood. Wyoming had granted suffrage as a territory, and in the process of the constitutional convention of women and men, delegates included suffrage for women “by an almost unanimous vote.”⁴⁹ Then, the “constitution was submitted to voters, men and women, and was accepted by a large majority.” Instead, the amendment was then put to a vote separately from the constitution, and voted on by men alone. The majority, in this case mattered little. Even with the interference, Blackwell added, it still “came very near carrying Congress,” and yet it was ultimately rejected.⁵⁰ The “public spirited minority,’ and indeed in some cases, the public spirited *majority* of women had voted, but had not been held to the same standard. Howe relies substantially on counts of voting patterns to highlight the importance of the voting population as compared to the general population. These trends established a precedent for the emerging suffragist’s arguments that not everyone need be counted. The logic of the “public spirited minority” was in essence already the logic of American democracy.

“A Conspicuous Demonstration”

NAWSA’s ambitious “big petition” campaign was introduced at the Annual Convention in 1908. The petition campaign was initially organized by Carrie Chapman Catt, the chairman of

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

the Committee on Petition to Congress. Catt served as NAWSA President from 1900-1904 and her tenure was often associated with a shift in philosophy towards organizing.⁵¹ The petition campaign was aimed at bolstering the movement's membership numbers through the organizing and public outreach work of a massive petition campaign. Suffragists developed two distinct strategies to discuss the significance of the ambitious scale of the big petition campaign. First, NAWSA claimed that active engagement in the campaign demonstrated success and intensity. Second, however, they often publicly called for signatures by emphasizing the sheer size of the campaign, thereby reflecting the rhetorical figure of magnitude. These discourses of magnitude embraced, rather than rejected the calls for "all women" to want suffrage.

First, suffragists internally claimed that the counting of signatures as reflected the intensity of members and the scope of suffrage work. This purpose was often reflected in what suffragists chose to count during the "big petition" campaign. The report from the NAWSA Committee on Petition to Congress at the 1910 convention by Rachel Foster Avery celebrated the range and scale of activities from the national office alone, "in 100,000 petitions and 5,000 individual letters sent from New York under Mrs. Catt's supervision. There had gone out from the headquarters... 60,000 more petitions, 11,000 more letters, and 1,185 postals with appeals."⁵² Avery reported on the scope of activities and celebrated member enthusiasm. The petition campaign, she argued, "has given many people who have never before done anything for suffrage an opportunity."⁵³ The emphasis on intensity of volunteer work was also present in updates on the campaign, which sometimes reported on such individual efforts. For example, an

⁵¹ Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, 46.

⁵² Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B Anthony, Matilda Gage, and Ida Harper, *History of Woman Suffrage* (Salem, NH: Ayer Co., 1985), 258. This quote is reproduced from the 1910 NAWSA Convention notes.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 275.

update in *The Woman's Journal* celebrated several accomplishments of the petition, including that "Miss Winifred Pease of 3020 S. 63d street, Tacoma, Wash., aged 14 years, has done splendid work for the petition, securing 21 names all by herself."⁵⁴ Suffragists celebrated the campaign in the substantial efforts of volunteers.

Publicly, however, suffragists framed the importance of the 1908 petition campaign primarily through magnitude. As Jenny Rice argues, magnitude can often have an aesthetic component that foregrounds the sense of "more" or abundance as itself a kind of claim to importance.⁵⁵ When they introduced the petition campaign in 1908, the call for "a million" signatures was front and center. A call for signatures in the woman suffrage publication *Progress* in July 1909 called on the "millions of suffragists in the United States," and emphasized, "we want just one million of those names to lay before Congress."⁵⁶ If it was not the "million" signatures they sought, suffragists referred to the "big petition" or the "monster petition." In a July 1909 *New York Times* article aptly titled "A Million for Suffrage," the update on the campaign carried the subtitle "Mrs. Avery Says That Her Monster Petition is Nearly Complete."⁵⁷ Announcements about the campaign trumpeted the "larger scale than ever before attempted."⁵⁸ This public demonstration focused less on the intensity of activities and much more substantially on the sheer number of signatures.

Certainly, a million signatures did not necessarily *require* all women to sign the petition. The appeal to the million as *many*, however, introduced some challenge to suffragists emerging

⁵⁴ Rachel Brill Ezekiel, "Petition Notes," *The Woman's Journal*, December 18, 1909.

⁵⁵ Jenny Rice, "The Rhetorical Aesthetics of More: On Archival Magnitude," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 50, no. 1 (2017): 28-29.

⁵⁶ "Petition," *Progress*, July 6, 1909.

⁵⁷ "A Million for Suffrage," *New York Times*, Jul 4 1909.

⁵⁸ Mary J. Coggeshall, "Monster Petition for Woman Suffrage," *The Woman's Standard*, February 8 1909.

arguments about the “public spirited minority.” The sheer scale of the campaign was positioned as a significant demonstration of public opinion. Elizabeth Cady Stanton described petitions about suffrage, which were delivered “by the tens of thousands” and “piled up in the national archives, unheeded and ignored.” The overabundance of signatures and the innumerable pages submitted to Congress were, according to Stanton, a substantial show of the force of public opinion.

In some cases, NAWSA framed the petition campaign in direct opposition to the narrative that not “all women” wanted suffrage. A December 1909 call for last minute signatures emphasized the need to “be representative of the suffrage sentiment in this country at the time it is presented.”⁵⁹ To be representative of the suffrage sentiment, that is, did not necessarily require all women, only a majority. And yet, many calls for signatures on the big petition embraced, rather than rejected, the need for “all women” to want to vote. At a speech in Colorado in 1909 shortly before Taft took office, Anna Howard Shaw emphasized the importance of the petition to appeal to the President. She cited “Mr. Taft has often said he was willing the women of America should have the right of franchise if they desired it.” Taft’s emphasis on “desire” echoed the new arguments that called for “all women” to want suffrage. In turn, Shaw positioned her call for participation in the petition campaign in response, calling for the “signature of every woman in Colorado” because “now is the time to give him the opportunity to show what he meant by this statement.”⁶⁰ These exemplars demonstrate the limitations of focusing on the minority for calls to participate.

⁵⁹ Brill Ezekiel, “Petition Notes,” 207.

⁶⁰ “Will Ask Taft for Suffrage,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 5, 1908.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on how anti-suffragist arguments that “all women” needed to want the vote presented both challenges and opportunities to turn of the century suffragists. In the midst of the “doldrums” of the suffrage movement, and the start of a new “monster petition” campaign, suffragists developed new claims about what it meant to be counted. Suffragists presented counts of the petition, of membership in suffrage organizations, and in votes. My analysis demonstrates the significance of time and space as clear strategies for making claims to magnitude, in this case by creating the potential for more quantities to list, and by making those quantities more vivid and concrete. Suffragists like Julia Ward Howe and Alice Stone Blackwell emphasized the importance of counting active citizens, of those with a “lively interest,” and therefore, the “public spirited minority” of voters. They began with the premise that public activities were all that should be counted, and thus used comparative measures of suffrage and anti-suffrage activities to make concrete the intensity of the suffrage movement. They then broadened the premise of focusing on active citizens to showcase the affinity with the logics of American democracy.

Suffragists thus argued that not “all women” need to be counted in American democracy, just as “all men” have not been. In the broader dissertation, this chapter demonstrates the importance of questions of *who should be counted* to discourses of civic counting. Claims to how best to understand public opinion are inseparable from substantial democratic questions about whose voice does or should matter in democracy, whether these arguments are implicit or explicit. Anti-suffragists claims about the need for “all women” to desire the vote for legitimacy forced suffragists to make claims about the majority and the active voter more explicit.

The “big petition” demonstrated the limitations of suffragist strategies of counting the intensity of the active citizenry while trying to frame new calls to be counted in a campaign. Ultimately, however, the suffragist focus on the “minority” found little traction in the most prominent form of counting during this period of the introduction of the “big petition.” Their strategy to focus on those with an active interest in the matter as a measure of how to evaluate a campaign was in effect, an effective argument *after* a campaign. It was not then, and is not now, however, easily reconcilable with a singular focus of demonstrating a mass in calls to be counted. In the end, the public focus on showcasing the need for “all women,” demonstrated the challenge of recruiting new members or signatures by eliminating those who might be convinced to *be* counted.

The limitation of the “whole” to those who care also has potential negative implications for democracy. The barriers to voting, including socioeconomic status and disenfranchisement as a result of imprisonment, would only be exacerbated by these concerns. Indeed, early scholars of polling saw it as a means to correct the problems of limited participation to democracy. For example, Sidney Verba’s oft-cited argument to expand the use of opinion polls in policy rests on the belief that polls offer the possibility to overcome the biases of political participation. Verba makes this claim despite the problems of self-selection of the “elite” and the comparative lack of resources required to participate in polls.⁶¹ While polls largely struggle to do so given the previously discussed sampling issues, this concern for representativeness would likely extend to suffragists claims about who should count. If NAWSA and many prominent suffragists rejected arguments that women were not qualified to vote, they rarely disputed the sensibility that there should be qualifications and in some cases, that the “masses” were not to be trusted. That is,

⁶¹ Sidney Verba, “The Citizen as Respondent: Sample Surveys and American Democracy,” *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996): 2.

suffragists at the turn of the nineteenth century still frequently embraced the qualifications argument for the vote, merely arguing that *some* women *were* qualified. Given the history of an overall lack of concern for women of color, this discourse leaves open a lot of possibilities for exclusion.⁶² Suffragist's long history of embracing the qualifications of education and assimilation likely indicated that it was not truly *all* those with a "lively interest" that would or should have been counted.

⁶² Graham, *Woman Suffrage*, 4-5; Flexner, *Century of Struggle*, 69-70.

CHAPTER 3: “THINKING AS A NATION”: AGGREGATION AND AUTHENTICITY IN FDR’S APPEALS FOR LETTERS, 1934-1937

The turn of the twentieth century brought an emergent sense of America as an increasingly uniform mass society and mass *culture* brought about by mass media and new trends in consumer capitalism.¹ At the same time, political culture was taking on new look. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt joined a twentieth-century line of “rhetorical” presidents who used mass media and oratory to vocally lead the nation and drive government agendas.² According to the logic of both mass society and the rhetorical presidency, American citizens were becoming part of a relatively homogenous American “public” comprised of common characteristics, experiences, and opinions.³ As Thomas Farrell argued, Roosevelt regularly addressed Americans a necessary part of the federal government response to emerging issues, with corresponding civic responsibilities. Collective action, for Roosevelt, was public action, and public action was critical to navigating the crisis of the Great Depression.⁴ This required

¹ On mass society, see Robert Wiese, *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 40. On culture, see Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans., J Cumming (New York: Seabury, 1972), 22. Finally, on mass media and society, see Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 385.

² On the rhetorical presidency, see Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 117-119. Stuckey argues Roosevelt fits within a tradition that emerged with the likes of Woodrow Wilson in the Progressive era. See Mary E. Stuckey, *Voting Deliberatively: FDR and the 1936 Presidential Campaign* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2015), 26.

³ On Presidents’ addressing the public as a nation, see Vanessa Beasley, *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2013); Mary E. Stuckey, *Defining Americans: The Presidency and National Identity* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004).

⁴ Thomas Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993), 85. Farrell’s analyzes Roosevelt’s 1st inaugural address, which responded to intense fears of the Depression by creating a “reciprocal bond with the public,” and “projecting the capacity of people to act constructively as a collectivity, rather than as separate interests pulling in fractioned direction trying to save themselves.”

extraordinary rhetorical effort. Indeed, Mary Stuckey argues by his 1936 bid for reelection the crises of the Depression and the impending threat of war meant that Roosevelt's "personal authority was weakened" along with the belief in the public interest. Roosevelt responded in force, arguing repeatedly that an active and engaged citizenry with a strong commitment to national interests needed to work in tandem with the president to ensure the progress of both his domestic and international agendas.⁵ Roosevelt sought to reinforce the importance and power of the public to strengthen the office of the presidency as the engine of public interest and the chief means of public representation.

In order to establish the presidency as the primary means of citizen representation, Roosevelt sought to enhance the channels of communication between the president and the public. This begins with his famous use of the radio to reach into the heart of the American home across the country. In turn, Roosevelt appealed to citizens to communicate in kind. Crucial to this were his repeated calls for letters, often in his famous fireside chats. Roosevelt further promoted letter right through regular public affirmations of their importance.⁶ In Roosevelt's first term, the volume of mail to the White House ballooned. They received 6,000 to 8,000 letters a day, compared to one hundred a day under President McKinley (1897-1901) and 800 a day under President Hoover (1929-1933).⁷ The volume of mail was such that Ira Smith, the first White House Chief of Mails, lamented in his memoirs that "when the President told them to write about

⁵Stuckey, *Voting Deliberatively*, 90.

⁶ Leila Sussman, "FDR and the White House Mail," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 20 (1956), 8.

⁷ Smith and Morris, *Dear Mr. President*, 12; Sussman, "FDR and the White House," 7. Sussman affirms these counts and suggests this is the "greatest deluge of letters ever seen in the White House" Roosevelt's role in expanding engagement with citizens through the letter extended beyond his administration as subsequent Presidents maintained similar levels.

their troubles,” the public “took him at his word.”⁸ Roosevelt, however, was far more pleased with the influx of letters.

Citizens responded with such enthusiasm that the White House had to set up a new department for handling mail.⁹ The mail office was concerned not just with responding to the high volume of letters, but also with making sense of their contents. Indeed, Smith’s office became for FDR a kind of crystal ball. “Whenever there was a decrease in the influx of letters,” Smith remarked, “we could expect to hear from him or one of his secretaries who wanted to know what was the matter—was the President losing his grip on the public?”¹⁰ Roosevelt’s vaunted letters continued to serve as a key index of public sentiment, even as the administration invested in new mechanisms such as opinion polling to gauge the beliefs of the public.¹¹

This chapter analyzes the ways that the Roosevelt administration rhetorically framed letter writing from 1934-1937—the years bookending the 1936 election—in order to better define what it meant to be “counted” as a citizen in the new age of mass democracy and the rhetorical presidency. Hence, I take up Jeffrey Mehlretter Drury’s call to study “invoked public opinion” and the presidency. How do presidents lead *by* public opinion, rather than just trying to get a gauge *of* public opinion?¹² Rhetorical scholars have tended to study the rhetorical

⁸ Ira Smith and Joe Morris, *Dear Mr. President: The Story of Fifty Years in the White House Mail Room* (Julian Messner Inc., NY: 1949), 213.

⁹ Alfred B. Rollins, “Young FDR and the Moral Crusaders,” *New York History* 37, no. 1 (1956): 3. This process began in Roosevelt’s early career in political office, and continued through his presidential administrations.

¹⁰ Smith and Morris, *Dear Mr. President*, 197.

¹¹ Melvin G. Holli, *The Wizard of Washington: Emil Hurja, Franklin Roosevelt and the Birth of Public Opinion Polling* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 39; Stuckey, *Voting Deliberatively*, 25. While Stuckey argues Roosevelt adopted a myriad of methods to understand public opinion, the emerging emphasis on demographic based group sentiment marked the start of an ongoing process that changed how policy makers view and understand citizen opinion.

¹² Jeffrey Mehlretter Drury, *Speaking with the People’s Voice: How President’s Invoke Opinion* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 5.

presidency by understanding presidential speech as an appeal for public support. To study leadership *by* public opinion is to analyze how presidents define and use public opinion as a way to navigate the demands of the public on the office.¹³

I argue that Roosevelt's calls for citizens to send letters, and thus be counted, framed letter writing as both expressions of aggregate public interest and as means of forming personal bonds with the president. By using the term *aggregate*, I aim to encompass a discourse of counting that foregrounds individual expressions or letters as part of the whole that are distanced from more simplistic focus on quantity (i.e., numerical representation) favored by suffragists. Rhetorically, aggregation as a form of claims of magnitude is still grounded in size as a way of claiming importance, but lacks the precision of quantity or even degree that reduce the individual parts to a number. Roosevelt relies substantially on pairing the discourse of aggregation with two other strategies of magnitude, elaborate description and repetition, which provide opportunities to emphasize the personal while still creating a means to scale up to speak to the nation rather than just the letter writers. This helped mediate the two competing visions of letters, as both relatively impersonal indexes of public sentiment and intimate vehicles of personal connection with a powerful public representative. Roosevelt navigates this tension by presenting the presidency as a channel through which the public interest could be both objectively aggregated and empathetically understood.

There are two key implications of this analysis for the dissertation. First, the tension between the individual and the aggregate reveals the boundaries of the rhetorical figure of magnitude and the extent to which the characteristic emphasis on "more" might become too

¹³ Drury, *Speaking with the People's*, 3. Drury is concerned primarily with Presidents as a way to contrast view of the rhetorical Presidency that take up public opinion as influenced by Presidents.

much or too big in service of making claims to what matters in public life.¹⁴ Second, Roosevelt's reliance on presidential authority as a channel through which the aggregate is understood showcases the centrality of questions of who *does* the counting. I consider both how Roosevelt foregrounds the importance of this argument, but also how his lack of public transparency about the means of counting constrains the debate.

I begin by considering how FDR framed his calls for letter writing by looking at two fireside chats where soliciting letters was an explicit goal, comparing the fireside chats to a popular article written early in the FDR administration by presidential secretary Louis Howe on the importance of mail to the White House. I then turn to a political debate about White House mail during the 1930s, focusing on a statement released by the Republican National Committee in 1937 that condemned the processes by which mail was sorted.

Thinking as a Nation: Roosevelt's Calls for Letters in Fireside Chats

During Roosevelt's presidency, social data played an increasingly significant role in understanding and making claims about American mass society. Political institutions had long gathered statistics on citizens,¹⁵ but the increasingly popularity of public opinion polls in the 1920s and 30s increasingly told "who they are" and "what they believe."¹⁶ As Sarah Igo

¹⁴ Jenny Rice, "The Rhetorical Aesthetics of More: On Archival Magnitude," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 50, no. 1 (2017), 59.

¹⁵ See for example, James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Paul Starr, "Sociology of Statistics," in *The Politics of Numbers*, ed. William Alonso and Paul Starr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987), 13-14. Political institutions had long embraced technocratic practices to track citizenly characteristics and behaviors to aid in decision making.

¹⁶ For the quotes, see Igo, *The Averaged American*, 11-18. See also, William Alonso and Paul Starr, introduction to *The Politics of Numbers*, ed. William Alonso and Paul Starr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987), 1-6. Igo situates the rise of opinion polling as a newer phenomenon concerned with public expressions of "normal" citizen opinions. Igo notes that surveys prior to this period were more often a tool for reformers studying narrow populations at risk. Alonso and Starr refer to the emergence of "national self-perceptions."

compellingly argues, polls did not simply respond to an appetite to understand the nation, but helped to create it.¹⁷ Pollsters like George Gallup gained prominence, contending that scientific measures were far more trustworthy than traditional means of gauging public opinion. And yet, these new forms of “counting” citizens engendered a great deal of apprehension and uncertainty, particularly into the 1940s.¹⁸

The Roosevelt administration relied heavily on these new methods of the social sciences to ostensibly better gauge public sentiment. Roosevelt’s efforts to gauge the public opinion were varied: he summoned feedback from political allies, took trips across the country, and instituted staffs of pollsters and social scientists to quantify public sentiment. Indeed, surveys, polls, and the collection of demographic data played a new and vital role in New Deal governance.¹⁹ Letter writing was still important in this respect and remained part of this broader social-scientific approach to governance. Letters were sorted and “read” using sophisticated processes of data analysis. The roughly twenty-five staffers of the mail department (which had numbered only one when FDR took office) read, categorized, and distributed mail, tallying letters by subject matter, geography, and demographics in a “scientific check” producing mail briefs for the president. These sophisticated analyses included tracking interest in topics over time.²⁰

Roosevelt’s famous fireside chats, broadcast via the radio into millions of American homes, were the means by which Roosevelt appealed to the public to urge participation in their governance by writing letters. I will examine two prominent examples: the April 28, 1935 fireside chat on the newly implemented Works Relief Program, and the October 12, 1937 fireside

¹⁷ Igo, *The Averaged American*, 11-18.

¹⁸ J. Michael Hogan, “George Gallup and the Rhetoric of Scientific Democracy,” *Communication Monographs*, 64, no. 2 (1997), 162.

¹⁹ Holli, *The Wizard of Washington*, 39.

²⁰ This process is described in more detail in Sussman, “FDR and the White House,” 9.

chat for an extraordinary session of Congress. I will refer to these as the 1935 fireside chat the 1937 fireside chat, respectively. In both speeches, Roosevelt appealed directly to the public to express their concerns, struggles, and even criticisms through letter writing. These calls were grounded in one of Roosevelt's most common arguments during his presidency: that there existed the ability for the nation to speak as a whole and indeed "think" as a whole when deliberating about national problems. In the 1935 fireside chat, Roosevelt argued that the public's "new" capacity to "think as a nation" was a "tremendous gain for the principles of democracy."²¹ This capacity of the public was a fundamentally new phenomenon, Roosevelt argued, "as never before in our history, each section of America says to every other section, 'Thy people shall be my people.'"²² The character of this argument provided an important key to understanding Roosevelt's calls to be counted via letter writing.

Key to understanding Roosevelt's appeals for public participation is an understanding of how he navigated the question of democratic authority, both his own and that of the public. Roosevelt's body of speeches provide important context. As Mary Stuckey notes, Roosevelt's appeals to the public affirmed that citizens had a strong role in decisions made on their behalf by the government and foregrounded the authority of the presidency; the result of which, Roosevelt argued, "empowered people," and subsequently "granted authority to the national government and its president."²³ Roosevelt thus justified expansions to the authority of the presidency through appeals to the national interest and support.²⁴ Roosevelt often represented American

²¹ Franklin Roosevelt, "Fireside Chat #7: Works Relief Program," April 28, 1935; Series 1 Master Speech File, Box 21. Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum website; version date 2013.

²² Ibid., 2.

²³ Stuckey, *Voting Deliberatively*, 91.

²⁴ Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*, 88. Farrell argues Roosevelt cemented his own power through public support in his first Inaugural.

citizens as in support of his proposed New Deal policies. These appeals are typical of presidential invocations of public opinion, which Drury argues also function to navigate the demands of the public and affirm their agency.²⁵

Roosevelt presented himself as a medium of public agency. As Thomas Farrell argues, a “characteristic” of Roosevelt’s rhetoric was that he spoke not as himself but as the voice of the people—speaking “*through the people to others.*”²⁶ If the president was the trusted agent to whom the public spoke and the primary means by which the public influenced policy; then the president’s duty was to seek to collect and translate the public expressions that revealed the public interest and then speak for his people. Roosevelt’s appeal to “think as a nation,” was carefully broad. Roosevelt commonly referred to the “public interest,” which encapsulates opinions, beliefs or values, but also the characteristics of citizens, common struggles, all under the same umbrella. It was not, that is, simply a collection of opinions expressed in letters that could be tallied. In constructing himself as a medium, Roosevelt emphasized the need for widespread and constant expressions of citizenly opinions to the White House. He also subtly positioned the people in a mass democracy as not always able to count themselves: they could be best counted if they spoke through the channel of the president.

Roosevelt’s used two distinct strategies to call for letter writing as a responsibility of an actively engaged citizenry in his two fireside chats. In his 1935 address, Roosevelt invited direct oversight of the implementation of the Works Relief Program through citizen letters in order to

²⁵ Drury, *Speaking with the People’s Voice*, 9. This is characteristic of “invoked public opinion,” whereas Drury argues these appeals often both convey public support for a policy, and affirm the agency of the public.

²⁶ Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*, 90, emphasis original.

ensure they were being adequately served.²⁷ Here Roosevelt followed the pattern of summoning citizenly voices so that he could *channel* them. In his 1937 fireside chat, by contrast, Roosevelt called upon citizens to *amplify* his own voice by encouraging citizens to send letters not to him, but to congressional representatives, in order to generate support for an extraordinary session of Congress. If key to the pursuit of the national interest was public participation, from which Americans come to “think” and “feel” as a nation, Roosevelt’s call for citizens to send letters provided the basis for how they might speak, *through* or *with* him, as one.²⁸

The 1935 fireside chat reporting on the implementation of the new Works Relief Program (WRP) called for citizenly participation to help assess the successes and failures of the program. Roosevelt called upon Americans to write letters as a feedback mechanism: through their letters, he suggested, the program could be evaluated and modified. In the 1935 fireside chat, Roosevelt argued that one of the main problems faced by New Deal programs were their scale and complexity. Knowing how they were working and what they were doing called for feedback from American citizens *en masse*. Roosevelt appealed to the need *for* magnitude, for *more* information and *more* letters as the best way to understand the importance and function of the WRP.

Roosevelt argued that “it must, however, be recognized that when an enterprise of this character is extended over more than three thousand counties throughout the nation, there may be

²⁷Sussman, “FDR and the White House,” 14-15. On a number of occasions, Roosevelt also called upon the public to put pressure on the Senate or House, a tactic he learned as governor of New York. As governor, Sussman argues FDR regularly appealed to constituents via the radio in moments when the state Legislature was uncooperative to his agenda.

²⁸ Franklin Roosevelt, “Fireside Chat Discussing Legislation to Be Recommended to Extraordinary Session of Congress,” October 12, 1937. fireside chats of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum website; version date 2013.

occasional instances of inefficiency, bad management or misuse of funds.”²⁹ Roosevelt thus called for a response suited to the scale and complexity of the implementation of the program in the form of “the eternal vigilance of the American people themselves.”³⁰ He continued, “I call upon my fellow citizens everywhere to cooperate with me in making this the most efficient and the cleanest example of public enterprise the world has ever seen.”³¹ Hence, Roosevelt called for citizens to write letters to him as participants in a supervisory exercise:

If you will help, this can be done. I therefore hope you will watch the work in every corner of this Nation. Feel free to criticize. Tell me of instances where work can be done better, or where improper practices prevail. Neither you nor I want criticism conceived in a purely fault finding or partisan spirit, but I am jealous of the right of every citizens to call to the attention of his or her government examples of how the public money can be more effectively spent for the benefit of the American people.³²

Citizens, Roosevelt argued, had already shown themselves capable of playing such a supervisory, critical role. If “the objective,” and thus the direction, of the country had changed from the time in which the “general good was at a discount,” Roosevelt attributed this change to the efforts of citizens.³³ He celebrated, for example, the “three years of hard thinking” that characterized his first years in office, during which “more and more people, because of clearer thinking and a better understanding are considering the whole rather than a mere part relating to

²⁹ Roosevelt “Works Relief Program,” 9.

³⁰ Ibid., 9-10.

³¹ Ibid., 10.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

one section or to one crop, or to one industry.”³⁴ This was important because he alone could not ensure success. He noted “the most difficult place in the world to get a clear open perspective of the country as a whole is Washington.”³⁵ Washington, he suggested, comprised a kind of echo chamber that needed to be opened up to new channels of communication.

In contrast, Roosevelt did recognize the limitations of the public in seeing the whole. Even as he argued for citizens to “think as a nation,” he frequently conceded that this was difficult for citizens in practice. This was true of evaluating the WRP, which he compared to the “building of a ship,” where “when one of these ships is under construction, and the steel frames have been set in the keel, it is difficult for a person who does not know ships to tell how it will finally look.”³⁶ Roosevelt appealed to the sense of Roosevelt therefore presented the presidency as the primary means through which the public could begin to see the whole. The president, much like the ship builder, could “get away from the trees” in order to “look at the whole forest,” and “see the country in long-range perspective.”³⁷ Letter writers he declared, should thus “call to attention,” or “tell *me*,” of their experiences.³⁸

The perceived intimacy of the radio address supported the view of Roosevelt as having a deeply personal relationship with citizens.³⁹ In this regard, calling for letters in the voice of

³⁴ Ibid., 2.

³⁵ Ibid., 3.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 10.

³⁹ Elvin T. Lim, “The Lion and the Lamb: De-Mythologising Franklin Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003), 437-464. I use “perceived” intimacy here deliberately. As Elvin Lim has argued, Roosevelt’s rhetoric is not particularly intimate. Regardless, however, there was and remains a perception of this intimacy. In these two Fireside addresses, in addition, it is clear in how Roosevelt framed letters to citizens as intimate expressions. Stuckey argues Roosevelt is an example of a shift towards personalized politics in the sense that the candidate, and their personality become central.

individual citizens completed a system of perceived intimacies. It was not simply that Roosevelt reinforced his own authority through the public, but also that he presented the presidency as intimately beholden to the public. Roosevelt argued that the executive branch held a unique relationship to the public: “there are, after all, only two positions in the nation that are filled by vote of all of the voters.”⁴⁰ This position, Roosevelt argued, came with a corresponding “duty” to speak “to and for” the American people.⁴¹ In this context, Roosevelt encouraged citizens to write and express their concerns and opinions to be channeled by the president for the common interest. This citizenly supervision of government activities was the means for citizens to bond with their government leader.

Roosevelt’s October 12, 1937 fireside chat “On New Legislation” did not contain as explicit a call for letters. In the address, Roosevelt discussed his proposal to convene an extraordinary session of Congress in order to consider the renewal and expansion of New Deal legislation six weeks before the regular session was set to begin. Accounts from staff members suggest the purpose of the speech was to motivate citizens to send letters to Congress, and thus put pressure on congressional representatives to support both the extra session and the new programs to be discussed.⁴² Roosevelt was already facing accusations in Congress about executive overreach with respect to the implementation of the New Deal. He used the 1937 fireside chat to call for citizens to support him in his battle against Congress. This was made all

Roosevelt in particular cultivated a perception of a close relationship with citizens. See Stuckey, *Voting Deliberatively*, 63.

⁴⁰ Roosevelt “Works Relief Program,” 3.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sussman, “FDR and the White House,” 14. Sussman cites a number of accounts from staff members that suggest this tactic was intentional, including a quote about a 1944 fireside chat to veto a tax Bill in which Roosevelt reportedly remarked “I’m going to put it right up the housewife” to “hold the boys in line better than I can.”

the more salient by the opponents to the extraordinary session of Congress who claimed such a session was anti-democratic—yet another example, according to his critics, of the president’s heavy-handed approach.⁴³

Roosevelt began the speech on a familiar theme. He emphasized the importance of his office, where “for a President, especially, it is a duty to think in national terms.”⁴⁴ He reiterated that “first-hand knowledge of the nation as a whole” was indispensable for “anyone charged with proposing or judging national policies.” In this case, the term “anyone” did significant work for Roosevelt. Congressional representatives, he suggested, by virtue of their office did not have a duty to serve the national interest so much as their smaller constituencies. The presidency, by contrast, demanded a view of the whole. Roosevelt, for example, refers to “hearing certain people [in Washington] talk and talk about all that Government ought not to do.” If these people were to, like Roosevelt, “go out through the country and feel the common wisdom that the time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining,” they would find that “they [the people] do not look on Government as an interloper in their affairs. On the contrary, they regard it as the most effective form of organized self-help.”⁴⁵ Here congressional representatives were presented as not only partial in their view of national crises, but as out of touch.

In appealing to Americans for their support for the extraordinary session, Roosevelt invoked the support of an “overwhelming majority of our citizens” for New Deal programs. The New Deal, he suggested, was the consensus position. Americans knew what was going on, and what was needed: they realized “these facts [of continued economic struggle]. That is why they

⁴³ Stuckey, *Voting Deliberatively*, 9. Stuckey argues for the very real perceptions and fears of executive overreach.

⁴⁴ Roosevelt, “Fireside Chat Discussing Legislation.”

⁴⁵ Ibid.

ask Government not to stop governing simply because prosperity has come back a long way.”

Roosevelt asserted that the presidency, when coupled with the support of the majority, comprised the “twentieth-century machinery” of government. The will of an active public channeled through a strong executive, he implied, represented a new and proper reconfiguration of political authority for the age of mass democracy.

The assumption then was that the president *knew* what the consensus position of the public was. Roosevelt based this claim to knowledge of the aggregate public interest primarily through repetition. Roosevelt referred to varied engagement with the public in personal ways. For example, he noted “again this year I have taken trips to all parts of the country.” Over and over again he invoked the authority of national opinion linked directly to the means by which he knew it to be so. For example, the “outstanding impression” of public support for “the broad objectives and policies” of the New Deal, he argued, was “gained on this recent trip to the Pacific Coast and back.” Roosevelt justified raising wages for low-income laborers based on a “recent trip,” in which “many people have talked to me about the millions of men and women and children who still work at insufficient wages and overlong hours.” Notably, for all the ways in which his administration embraced and utilized social scientific methods of data collection and analysis, his claims to know public opinion here were largely anecdotal in nature. They scale up to a sense of the public interest, however, through frequent repetition to these examples. These purported conversations added up into public consensus through Roosevelt.

Congress, therefore, was not only out of touch with the majority, but needed to hear from the people, as he had. “I shall ask this special session to consider immediately certain important legislation which my recent trip through the nation convinces me the American people immediately need.” Ultimately, then, it is the people of the United States, and not Roosevelt

himself, who need to start speaking up to Congress. If congressmen will not “go out through the country,” then citizens should send letters to make their voice heard.

Thus, while the 1937 fireside chat did not contain an explicit call for letters to be written to congressional representatives, it was clear that in the address Roosevelt was confronting the limits of the vision of the executive branch he had established in his 1935 fireside chat. It was not enough, after all, for the president alone to channel and execute the public interest. Congress needed to participate in the processes of the “twentieth-century machinery” of government too. By arguing that the congressional vision was narrow and out of touch, Roosevelt implicitly called for citizens to remedy the problem by speaking to, and writing, congressmen—if not to bring Congress into the machinery of government, then at least to keep them from halting it.

Intimate Accounting: Describing the President’s “Mail Bag”

Letters are a personal medium. Letter-writing campaigns, however, would seem to be, by definition, an impersonal form of advocacy—they are there to be counted, not read. The Roosevelt administration was well aware of this dilemma. On the one hand, they wanted to claim the authority of the people’s voice via letters; on the other hand, they risked appearing to be a vast collection agency. Roosevelt’s calls to send letters as a means of understanding and channeling national sentiment and majority opinion made the administration’s public stance on letters all the more significant, and, as we will see, controversial. A clear exemplar of how the administration framed the significance of letters, and navigated the tensions of their counting, was Presidential Secretary Louis Howe’s 1934 article in the *American Magazine*. The article was

billed largely as a “day in the life” of the handling of presidential mail, covering an array of topics from types of letters to the sorting process and security for suspicious packages.⁴⁶

In the article, Howe positioned letters as a means of understanding the public interests and sentiment in the aggregate and as a means of bonding with the president. At issue here, Howe suggested, were two forms of democratic political authority: that of authorized procedures for quantitatively analyzing the influx of letters, and that of authentic connections between the people and the president. The former impersonally navigated volume and the latter personally navigated relationships. Letters to the White House, Howe suggested, *are* and *are not* counted.

Howe depicted the sheer volume of letters sent to the White House on a daily basis as an indication of the president’s popularity. He celebrated, “everyone writes to the President these days,” noting that even “ordinary citizens are evidently doing so for the first time.”⁴⁷ He contrasted the large number of letters sent to Roosevelt with the relatively small number of letters sent to previous presidents, attributing the dramatic uptick in the volume of letters not only to the popularity of the president but to the “consciousness of the United States citizens of their own part in the Government and of an actual intimate bond between themselves and the man in the mansion on Pennsylvania Avenue.”⁴⁸ White House mail processing, therefore, Howe suggested, required a delicate balancing act between making aggregate assessments to gauge public and intimate connections between people and their president.

It came down, he argued, to a process that began with the president’s staff of mail clerks, who could not only quickly categorize letters, but could also from long practice “quickly

⁴⁶ Louis Howe, “The President’s MAILBAG,” in *The American Magazine* (The Crowell Publishing Company, May 1934), 22, 118-122.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

separate the most important communications.”⁴⁹ Howe noted, for example, “the most important Presidential mail and letters addressed to me as secretary are carried to Mr. Smith’s desk.”⁵⁰ The important letters, Howe reassured the public, were not just matters of official business. They were matters of intimate connections, coming not so much from powerful people but from the ordinary citizen. Howe detailed, for example, that, “it is the scrawled, perhaps illiterate, but always sincere note from the obscure persona which interests President Roosevelt most.”⁵¹ Thus, Howe implied that White House mail processing was first and foremost a means of making sure that the people could authentically connect with their president.

At the same time, Howe argued letters represented “the most important data from which to find the course of most direct benefit,” and the “most perfect index to the state of mind of the people.”⁵² He thus carefully explained how letters become data to the White House, so as to be translated into action. Howe noted, for example, that the “President likes to see a cross section of the daily mail.” Roosevelt “has always insisted that he be sent daily a batch of letters picked at random from the miscellaneous mail.”⁵³ The language of “randomness” here spoke to the social scientific sensibility of the Roosevelt administration. Indeed, Howe went further to emphasize the power of “chance,” writing “there is always a chance” that the ordinary citizen’s letter “will be picked out of the mail and given to the President to read.”⁵⁴ Thus, Howe suggested that while the content of the letters was understood broadly, they were still valued as individual expressions.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 118.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Howe's careful navigation of the aggregate public and the value of reading of individual letters was further emphasized in his descriptions of the impact of the letters. "More letters than you'd think out of such a large mail," Howe celebrated, "come either directly or indirectly to the attention of the President himself."⁵⁵ The "indirect" attention gestured broadly to the perceptions formed by mail clerks in the reading, and in the brief. By collapsing the "indirect" attention with the direct, Howe was able to again draw attention to the importance of each individual letter. He went on to describe Roosevelt's devotion to the ordinary citizen, for example, through "how frequently the President stops his daily work either to send a little personal note in reply or to direct that the sender's request be granted if possible," a practice Howe called "amazing."⁵⁶ Howe echoed the vague "indirect" process of attention in the use of letters, where "some of these letters have undoubtedly influenced the President directly or indirectly in deciding his course."⁵⁷ The "indirect" attention became more concrete in letters on the New Deal, in which "the whole letter, or at least a summary, reaches the President's desk."⁵⁸ And yet, summary still provided little detail about the actual *counting*. Howe did not provide details of the process of analysis completed on letters, much of which undoubtedly accounted for the "indirect" influence. The direct and indirect attention reinforced Roosevelt's role to understand and channel the public interest. It also presented the public interest as grounded in many encounters between Roosevelt (rather than the mail clerks) and the public.

The subtlety of the language of counting was important, not just for this construction of the public, but also to maintain Howe's second purpose in casting the letters as a reflection of the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

authentic and intimate relationship each citizen had with the President of the United States.

Howe began by offering an intimate vision of the letters describing key details describing the letters, the writers, and their locales. He vividly described letters that were “scribbled on butcher paper or ruled pages torn from a cheap pad.”⁵⁹ Similarly, on the writers, it was “the small merchant, or the country storekeeper, or the workman in a city factory, or the farmer on a worn-out New England homestead,” who sent letters that were “read carefully by the secretaries.”⁶⁰ Elaborate description is also a means of creating a sense of magnitude, a way of adding *weight* to a particular issue. This strategy, when accompanied by a more *quantitative* claim to magnitude, humanizes what might otherwise seem like an impersonal process.⁶¹

Howe relied further on such rich description to reinforce the intimacy of the relationship between Roosevelt and the average citizen by portraying letters as a joyous break from the duties of the presidency. He described colorfully seeing Roosevelt “spend precious moments poring over letters,” after which he “[directed] special attention or replies to the writers.”⁶² These descriptions portrayed a vision of the importance of letters to Roosevelt through each individual citizen’s expression. Howe provided specifics of the letter writers that ground this relationship, but were broad enough to which a larger category of citizens might identify with the workman or the storekeeper.

The intimacy of the letters was also evident in the letters that Howe suggested Roosevelt did not read, or at least not carefully. Letters that focused on “plans, plans and plans,” for

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Frank J. Stec, “Bringing Attention to the Human Costs of War: Grievability, Deliberation, and Anti-War Numbers,” *Southern Communication Journal* 81, no. 5 (2016), 276. Stec describes a similar process with statistics on death and injury in war, which can rely on claims to a large quantity, but can also be reinforced by description.

⁶² Howe, *The President’s MAILBAG*, 118.

example, “must be read.”⁶³ And yet, they were not likely to be read by Roosevelt unless they represented unique ideas. Instead, “a brief abstract is made of it.”⁶⁴ Howe was careful not to outright condemn these types of letters, but offered subtle commentary about letters that were less helpful for the President, or less likely to receive attention. In addition to the subtle dig in the repetition of “plans,” Howe carefully described how Roosevelt “directed” attention to plans, but it was because he was “undiscouraged by the fact that most such plans have been either anticipated by some project actually underway or thoroughly considered and rejected.”⁶⁵ These plans were not often helpful, though certainly Roosevelt held to his duty regardless. Notably, “pressure mail” in form letters directed from organizations was the only type of letter Howe unilaterally condemned and labeled as “virtually the only letters coming to the White House which are not really read.”⁶⁶ Howe went on to describe the treatment of such letters, where “if we are really interested in the matter they discuss, we pile them up and estimate from the size of the stacks, the extent of the sentiment for or against.”⁶⁷ Howe conveyed the process of tallying as a rough, careless analysis.

In contrast, readers were left with the assurance that “the rest of the mail is read—really read,” on the basis of the value that Roosevelt placed on “a personal letter,” from “the farmer or miner or little shopkeeper.”⁶⁸ These less helpful letters stood in stark contrast to the intimacy of the letters to be celebrated. Citizens were encouraged, instead, to write letters that reflected the intimacy of their bond with Roosevelt. The letters from the “New England homestead” or the

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

“workman in a city factory,” were intriguing because they focused on “the problems confronting the writer, or his viewpoint on some of the proposed items in the New Deal program.”⁶⁹

Similarly, letters that reflected “the viewpoints of men whose daily lives and fortunes were most affected by the problems” were said to be of particular value to the President. Howe similarly emphasized the value in letters that eschewed overt political arguments. “But where the request is obviously sincere, and not for the purpose of getting a letter back from the President,” Howe noted, “it is almost certain to receive the President’s personal attention.”⁷⁰ The contrast between the intimate bond of the “important” letters and their content specific to the experiences of the ordinary citizen individualized the letters in relation to FDR. In the process, Howe centered the significance of being counted as one of the “6,500” letters every day through the lens of a personal correspondence with Roosevelt, rather than through their relationship with the 6,499 other citizens who sent letters. Counting, after all, *was* and *was not* the desired outcome.

Debating the Sorting Process

Roosevelt’s calls to write letters became a point of contention for the Republican National Committee (RNC) in September 1936. The RNC released a statement that took issue with how the “million” letters sent to the White House on the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) were handled. These letters made up a significant percentage of the presidential mail, and they were often sorted directly to the agencies in question. The sorting process was made more salient by the significant scrutiny on the WPA over accusations of graft by local administrators. Republicans pressured Roosevelt to turn over detailed records about workers for public oversight, which the

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Quoted in “Says Whitehouse Ignores Letters,” *The Baltimore Sun*, September 27, 1936.

administration denied on privacy concerns. The RNC continued these attacks on Roosevelt and FERA through a different tactic, the mail from citizens about the agency, which would surely reveal the grift and ineffectiveness. The statement, however, focused far more on attacking Roosevelt on the grounds of sorting the mail, and thus failing to be accessible to the average citizen rather than the departments. The RNC argued mail sorting procedures made letters to Roosevelt a “futile” endeavor.⁷¹ At the same time, they constructed sorting as a betrayal of the intimacy of letters to Roosevelt, reaffirming the tensions between counting and the bond with citizens put forward by the administration.

The RNC statement placed significant emphasis on counting the letters as an aggregate and as a reflection of trends in the letters in order to demonstrate the flaws in the sorting process. This began with an appeal to the scale of letters ignored. For example, they argued that “the millions of Americans who wrote to their President at his invitation and received form letter answers will know the truth” on the “futility” of letter writing.⁷² The statement also touted an “analysis” of the White House mail on FERA and the WPA over the course of a week sorted by topic. For example, they offered precise counts of the “83.3 per cent,” that consisted of “complaints about the WPA program in general, or the handling by relief officials of individual cases and specific instances with includes evidence of W.P.A. extravagance, politics, coercion, etc.”⁷³ The purpose of including such percentages was to showcase that all such subjects were treated largely the same. They argued that “the President has made no effort to see that these letters received any consideration; that in fact, they were treated in the same manner as

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

unsolicited ‘crank’ letters.”⁷⁴ In spite of Roosevelt’s invitation, “sixty-five percent of them were routed by clerks to the WPA and FERA.”⁷⁵ Ultimately, these percentages aimed to showcase the importance of the material being ignored and to call for the letters to be read and responded to. It was therefore an argument *for* being counted, and counted better.

In addition to counting, the RNC similarly positioned letters as a personal correspondence to President Roosevelt, rather than the White House more broadly. The statement specified that letters were written to the President specifically, where “approximately 75 percent” of the million letters were “addressed to the President or to Mrs. Roosevelt,” and still “sent to the correspondence division of the W.P.A. and F.E.R.A.”⁷⁶ This was a betrayal of intention, the statement argued, where “many of the letters written to the President of the United States,” were written “in the belief that the writer was speaking in confidence to the nation’s executive.”⁷⁷ The problem, then, was more than just counting. The letters, the RNC argued, were written to Roosevelt, not to the White House. The betrayal was made more significant because of Roosevelt’s own appeals to “write to me” in his various radio addresses. “Many of these sincere citizens who attempted to communicate with the President,” argued the committee, did so “at his solicitation.”⁷⁸ The RNC contrasted these appeals with the response, where for example “twice the President has invited the public over the radio to write to him,” on foreclosures, after which “the thousands of letters written to the President in response to this invitation were promptly sent

⁷⁴ Quoted in “Says Whitehouse Ignores Letters,” *The Baltimore Sun*, September 27, 1936.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Quoted in “Fireside Chat Replies Receive Scant Attention,” *Herald Tribune Bureau*, September 27, 1936.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Quoted in “G.O.P. Charges Many Letters to Roosevelt Never Arrive,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 27, 1936.

to the FERA office.”⁷⁹ The RNC subsequently argued that letters about corruption and graft were merely being diverted back to the officials undertaking such corruption through the process of sending letters to departments. The RNC reiterated that neither did the President respond which meant “the only consideration given these earnest and sincere men and women from all over the country who responded to the request of the Chief executive to place their suggestions and problems before him, was a cursory reply from a clerk or petty official.”⁸⁰ Like Howe, the RNC framed the letters as a recognition of an intimate relationship with Roosevelt.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Roosevelt called for letters to the White House as a way to both better gauge the “public interest” and to project intimate connections with citizens. He navigated the challenges of political authority in twentieth-century American mass democracy by asserting the competency of the White House in enacting authorized procedures for aggregating and rendering the public will; and presenting letter-writing as a form of authentically communicating with the president.

In the process, Roosevelt advanced two distinct visions of letters in relation to public opinion. Letters were an aggregate that could be added, if not *counted*, to speak to the public interest. At the same time, letters were deeply personal and reflective of an intimate bond. In his overt calls for letters, Roosevelt brought these two visions together by building an aggregate of individual and personal encounters. The RNC, ironically, did not challenge this rhetoric—to the contrary, they reinforced these same arguments about the significance of the letters. Despite their opposition to Roosevelt, they affirmed the ends if not the methods by which the president was to

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

navigate the tensions between the individual and the aggregate. They reinforced his characteristic call to speak “to, and for” the American people by centering the executive branch as uniquely charged with counting, and listening to, citizens.

In the process, Roosevelt provided a distinct vision of the rhetorical presidency that moves beyond an accountability to the public, or even references to public support. Roosevelt grounded his authority in his ability to collect, understand, and channel the public interest into action. Roosevelt’s depiction of the process of understanding the public interest through many, but still largely personal encounters with citizens or their letters placed the emphasis on *who* does the counting, over questions of who should be counted, and how that preoccupied suffragists. Roosevelt’s rhetorical construction of magnitude is far more concerned with *scale* than strict *quantity*. One individual’s letter could be scaled up in its importance through the uniqueness and substance of description to speak to a much broader issue.

If suffragists demonstrated the potential to debate who should be counted, and how those counts should be compared, Roosevelt’s reliance on the traditional means of gathering public opinion was precisely what made his view of the public difficult to refute. Frank Stec argues citizen claims using numerical measures rely on a transparent process by which those numbers are produced, both in the methods and analysis.⁸¹ The discussions of these methods has significant implications for how citizens might engage with presidential invocations of public opinion. FDR’s negotiation of authority through the tensions between individual and aggregate views of the letter constrained the potential for debates over what it means to be counted through civic action. Roosevelt’s calls for public sentiment productively extend Drury’s call to study

⁸¹ Stec, “Bringing Attention to the Human Costs,” 276.

“invoked public opinion.”⁸² His aim to understand the purpose of presidential invocations make his broad understanding of invocations of opinion independent from particular channels through which they might be measured appropriate. In keeping with Drury’s approach, I do not intend to argue for the effectiveness of one measure over another. My analysis, however, shows that close attention to the “modes of expression” that might accompany invocations of public opinion are key to the potential for substantive engagement by citizens. In the midst of the proliferation of surveys, polls, and other quantitative forms of opinion, the Roosevelt administration laid the groundwork for the political authority of counting by asserting that it can be simultaneously a process that is authorized and official *as well as* authentic and personal.

⁸² Drury, *Speaking with the People’s Voice*, 13.

CHAPTER 4: “ONE [AFRICAN AMERICAN] NATION, UNDER GOD”: COUNTING AND VISIONS OF TRANSFORMATION IN THE 1995 MILLION MAN MARCH

Crowd size is notoriously difficult to estimate, and has long been contested by movements, journalists, politicians, and the general public.¹ The Million Man March remains a consistent touchstone for debates about crowd size because of the fervor of the debate, even 20 odd years later. Newspapers listed figures ranging from 800,000 to 1.2 million. According to the National Park Service, the October 16, 1995 Million Man March would have more accurately been named the 400,000 Man March. Some argued that even 400,000 was an overestimate.² In the middle of his keynote speech at the event, Louis Farrakhan—the leader of the Nation of Islam and the figurehead of the march—declared the attendance upwards of “two to three million.” He threatened to sue over the low count. In an anthology celebrating the march, a student organizer suggested that the low estimates were proof that “this system still sees us a 3/5 of a man.”³ The vitriol over the crowd size prompted the U.S. House to remove funding for crowd estimates in a 1996 appropriations bill for the Department of the Interior that allowed the National Park Service to decline to count crowd size.⁴ A staffer responsible for the provision

¹ Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 135-137.

² See for example, Boston University Center for Remote Sensing, “Million Man March,” *Boston University*, <http://www.bu.edu/remotesensing/research/completed/million-man-march/>

³ Calvin R. Atkins, “The Epiphany,” in *Million Man March/Day of Absence: Commemorative Anthology*, eds. Haki R Madhubuti and Maulana Karenga (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1996), 71.

⁴ The National Park Service was previously obligated to release crowd size estimates for all events on park land. This included the National Mall, a frequent location for marches across the history of American civic participation. Those estimates would be left to private companies, organizers, or at times, police agencies, and would continue to inspire significant debate.

suggested naively of crowd counts, “in the end, the legacy from the Million Man March might simply be that we have one less thing to argue about.”⁵

The debates over the head count at the Million Man March were part of a more substantial debate about Farrakhan as both a figurehead for the march and the African American community. As John L. Pauley succinctly puts it, much of the controversy in the lead up to the march focused on the “coupling and uncoupling of the *message* of the march with its *messenger*.”⁶ Farrakhan was condemned not only by politicians and the predominantly white mainstream media, but also civil rights organizations, black feminist organizations, and Jewish organizations for his anti-Semitic, sexist, and homophobic comments both before and after the march. A few days before the march, he gave an interview with *Reuters* in which he argued Jewish people had purchased homes in African American neighborhoods, deeming them “bloodsuckers,” who “took from our community and built their community.”⁷ During and after the Million Man March, various civil rights leaders lauded the “spirit” of the march, but argued the meaning of the march was distinct from Farrakhan’s message. Paradoxically, the attempt to distance Farrakhan from the march meant that much of the media framing of the march focused substantially on Farrakhan, negative or otherwise.⁸

Yet separating the message of the march from the words of its most prominent spokesperson was difficult to do if for no other reason than that Farrakhan would not let it be so.

⁵ Jason Alderman, “Here’s Why We’ll Never Know How Many People Attended The Inauguration.” *The Huffington Post*, February 27, 2017.

⁶ John L. Pauley II, “Reshaping Public Persona and the Prophetic Ethos: Louis Farrakhan at the Million Man March,” *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 4 (1998): 512.

⁷ He extended the practice to “Palestinian Arabs,” “Koreans,” and “Vietnamese,” who he reiterated were “bloodsuckers.”

⁸ S. Craig Watson, “Framing Protest: News Media Frames of the Million Man March,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2001), 83.

He offered himself as its most important interpreter through an appeal to superior vision. For its attendees and the watching public, the debates about crowd size at the Million Man March were inseparable from debates over the messenger and the message. Farrakhan joined civic myths to mysticism and discourses of nationhood to argue for the transformative power of the Million Man March. And he did this by counting—counting, ultimately, to *oneness*, which for him was inseparable from nationhood. He positioned the magnitude of the march as an indication of a *transformation* more than a *representation* of the black community. Counting was a means of divination, revelation, and ultimately transformation. In this chapter, I consider how Farrakhan counted so as to show what he counted: one nation within a nation.

The implications of Farrakhan's preoccupation with oneness for understanding the rhetoric of counting in the broader dissertation are twofold. First, Farrakhan's link between "one" as a key number in numerology and his subsequent focus on oneness of the nation function to reinforce the process of creating *unity*. For Farrakhan, gathering in one space at one time allowed for a moral and civic transformation of black men aimed to create a sense of the one nation. Second, oneness and the logic of nationhood represent a unique form of counting not quite encapsulated by appeals to quantity, degree, or even the more amorphous sense of the aggregate for Roosevelt or the majoritarian logics of the suffragists. Counting mattered to Farrakhan in ways that no pollster could measure or comprehend. They mattered because in the end, only one number mattered: the number *one*.

Calling for the March: The Message, the Messenger, and the Million Man

One of the many promotional posters for the Million Man March called for black men to attend the October 1995 march by emphasizing the significance of the "million," urging marchers to "BE THERE. BE COUNTED." Calls from organizers, most centrally Farrakhan and

Reverend Benjamin Chavis Jr., provided a vision of the march that focused on Farrakhan's vision of spiritual renewal and atonement for African American men. He called for women, children, and black men who for one reason or another could not attend the march to take part in the "Day of Absence" by refraining from work and all other obligations. And like the early censuses, it was only men who would be counted. Farrakhan did not directly include women in the ritualistic display. "Mothers and daughters" Farrakhan argued, were called to "aid us in this march by staying at home with the children teaching them in sympathy with what your black men have finally decided to do."⁹ That vision would not remain uncontested. In addition to the push for more concrete policy goals by other civil rights leaders, Farrakhan faced opposition from a number of fronts, each of which aimed to offer an interpretation of the significance of the march and Farrakhan's role. Not surprisingly, Farrakhan's vision of the march and the importance of the crowd as a way to unify and renew the African American community was challenged by those that aimed to disassociate the significance of the "million man" in the crowd from Farrakhan himself.

Farrakhan's vision of the Million Man March focused substantially on demonstrating to the outside world the dignity of black men. He formally announced the Million Man March in the December 14, 1994 issue of the *Final Call*, the official newspaper of the Nation of Islam. In his call for attendees, he cited the "mounting force of hate" and announced, "we therefore have deemed it necessary in this critical hour to call for one million disciplined, committed and dedicated black men, from all walks of life in America, to march in Washington, D.C.—showing the world a vastly different picture of the black male."¹⁰ The "picture" of the black male was a

⁹ Louis Farrakhan, "The Minister Louis Farrakhan Calls for A Million," *Final Call*, December 14, 1994.

¹⁰ Ibid.

recurring theme for Farrakhan. The march was aimed at disputing stereotypes about the black male to external audiences. In an appearance on Larry King Live, for example, Farrakhan noted the tendency “to look at the black male as a criminal.” He told King, “our march on Washington is to say we are not that.”¹¹ At the same time, Farrakhan argued that African Americans needed to look internally at their own communities to address chronic crises like rising crime rates and absent fathers. A promotional flyer for the march succinctly captured this balancing act, declaring the aim of the event was “to show America and *ourselves*” that the African American community was dedicated to these values. Attendance at the march, Farrakhan argued, would thus display a new “picture” of black men to the (white) world while functioning as a mirror for the black community to see itself.

Farrakhan’s summons to the march focused largely on community rather than specific political issues or demands. Over time, however, he was pushed to attach a more specific agenda to the march. Three key issues were featured in organizing and promotional materials about the march: solutions to the issues of the “black family and community development,” voting rights and affirmative action, and economic reinvestment in the African American community.¹² Farrakhan saw the first goal—family and community—as nearest to the core purpose of the march. He returned over and over again to themes of self-respect and self-responsibility with a renewed emphasis on the black man’s role in the family. The march would later receive a third title that reflected these aims, in addition to the “Day of Absence” and the “Million Man March,”

¹¹ Quoted in “Farrakhan, Chavis Call For 1995 Million Man March On Washington,” *New Pittsburgh Courier*, December 31, 1994.

¹² Million Man March Organizing Committee, “Goals,” in *Million Man March/Day of Absence: Commemorative Anthology*, eds. Haki R Madhubuti and Maulana Karenga (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1996), 150-152. These goals are described in the organizing materials for the march, reproduced in the anthology. In some materials, these goals were referred to in less concrete policy terms, for example in a promotional poster that listed the goals to “realize our political strength,” “recognize our economic power,” and “mobilize the men in our communities in unity.”

the march came to be known as a “Holy Day of Atonement.” Chavis, a co-organizer of the march, called it a “march in Washington” not a “march on Washington” in contrast with a protest that he implied would make them “dependent on government programs” as opposed to building within their own community.¹³

The focus on “ourselves,” however, could not downplay the importance of the marchers to the external white audiences—as Farrakhan framed it, the outside (especially white) world functioned as necessary witnesses to the rite of atonement. In *Final Call*, Farrakhan introduced the aims of the march as a demonstration of the atonement:

We are calling on all able-bodied black men to set aside a day, October 16, 1996 for a historic March on Washington to declare to the Government of America and the world that we are ready to take our place as the head of our families and our communities and that we, as black men, are ready to shoulder the responsibility of being the maintainers of our women and children and builders of our communities.¹⁴

It was not simply that Farrakhan, as a spiritual leader, sought to argue for black men to take responsibility, but rather that they must *demonstrate* this responsibility to a watching world. At the center of both the spiritual and rhetorical logic of the Million Man March was ritualistic renewal achieved through enumeration.

Criticisms of Farrakhan’s call for the Million Man March began soon after the initial announcement. His history of anti-Semitism, homophobia and sexism was a major focus. Chavis was similarly controversial. The former Executive Director of the NAACP, Chavis was forced to resign from his position in 1994 for using organizational funds to settle sexual harassment

¹³ Walsh, “Chavis Backs Farrakhan on D.C. March,” *The Washington Post*, December 12, 1994.

¹⁴ Farrakhan, “Minister Farrakhan Calls.”

claims. Black feminists provided some of the most substantial critiques, condemning the march's focus on men and the gendered hierarchy it entailed and endorsed.¹⁵

Still, many critics also wanted to express sympathy for the plight of black men in the United States and sought ways, as Pauley suggests, to differentiate between the message and its main messenger while still affirming the need for the march.¹⁶ Over and over prominent Civil Rights leaders condemned Farrakhan, but justified their support for or involvement in the march based on its positive aims. For example, the *Washington Post* ran a story two days before the march with the lead "March Foes Assail Leaders, Not Aims."¹⁷ Mary Frances Berry, chairperson for the US Commission on Civil Rights, refused to endorse the march, declaring, "I do not support the leadership of Mr. Farrakhan and Benjamin Chavis." At the same time, she expressed sympathy for the march's importance for black men as a positive affirming activity she called "crucial."¹⁸

Upon the occasion of the march itself critics did more than just distance Farrakhan from the message; they also attempted to dissociate Farrakhan from the size of the gathering.

Farrakhan had long been leader of the Nation of Islam and the success of the march, for some, threatened to vault him to the forefront of the public stage for the African American community more broadly. Critics therefore sought to describe the spirit and motivations of those gathered as independent of the leadership of Farrakhan. Colin Powell refused to appear at the march for fear

¹⁵ Angela Davis, for example, argued "Justice cannot be served by countering a distorted racist view of black manhood with a narrowly sexist vision of men standing 'a degree above women.'" Quoted in Michel Marriott, "*Black Women Are Split Over All-Male March on Washington*," *New York Times*, October 14, 1995.

¹⁶ Pauley provides a number of other examples, see Pauley "Reshaping Public Persona," 514.

¹⁷ D Vera Cohn and Debbi Wilgoren, "March Foes Assail Leaders, Not Aims," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 1995.

¹⁸ Mary Frances Berry, "I Have Not Endorsed the March," *The Washington Post*, October 10, 1995. Letter.

of giving credibility to Farrakhan's leadership. He did not hesitate, however, to explain its meaning: "what you're seeing in Washington today are hundreds of thousands of black men coming together not to celebrate Louis Farrakhan or to buy into his agenda . . . but to begin to uplift black men and uplift African Americans to be part of an inclusive America." Powell added, "we should let those hundreds of thousands of men make their own decision" rather than assuming they affirm Farrakhan.¹⁹ Farrakhan's supporters—many of whom were present at the march—insisted that neither the march nor its message could be separated from its leader.

Debates over Farrakhan's role in inspiring or even shaping the marchers continued well after the march. Reverend Willie Wilson, one of the organizers of the march, celebrated the "unseen presence" that drove the incredible assembly in spite of the "undermanned, underfunded, unorganized efforts to make something happen."²⁰ Haki Madhubuti, a prominent black writer and poet, introduced the commemorative anthology on the Million Man March by celebrating that "one-twentieth of the black male population responded with a fired up yes to the MMM/DOA call," but downplayed Farrakhan and the other speakers.²¹ He argued "the great majority of men," during the march, "focused on themselves and each other rather than the speaker's platform."²² Even if the audience wanted to listen, Madhubuti noted, "due to the

¹⁹ Elizabeth Shogren, "Powell Praises Positive Parts of Gathering," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1995.

²⁰ Willie F. Wilson, "The Miracle of the Million Man March," in *Million Man March/Day of Absence: Commemorative Anthology*, eds. Haki R Madhubuti and Maulana Karenga (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1996), 57.

²¹ Haki R Madhubuti, "Took Back our Tears, Laughter, Love and Left a Big Dent in the Earth," in *Million Man March/Day of Absence: Commemorative Anthology*, eds. Haki R Madhubuti and Maulana Karenga, (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1996), 2.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

numbers and the inadequate video and audio systems, it was just about impossible to hear or see all that was coming from the speaker's platform."²³

Journalists turned to polling to attempt to find an empirical answer that answered the question of the significance of Farrakhan to the march. The *Washington Post* released a poll a week before the event that aimed to definitely settle the question of Farrakhan's influence on the marchers and their desire to attend the event. The story concluded "many of those who approve of the march voice strong reservations about Farrakhan," and noted that "84% of blacks surveyed," thought the march was a good idea, but nearly half had a negative impression of Farrakhan."²⁴ The *Washington Post* sent pollsters to the march in order to collect data about the attitudes of its participants. Survey questions included questions about views on Farrakhan prior to the march, whether they approved of the message of the march, and whether their attitudes had changed after the march.²⁵ The survey indicated "it was the message and not the march's most prominent messenger that brought these black men and a handful of women and whites to the nation's capital."²⁶ Not surprisingly, supporters of Farrakhan rebutted that the sheer size of the gathering was proof positive of Farrakhan's leadership strength.

Subsequent articles citing the *Washington Post* poll, for example, suggested that in spite of the survey results that showed Farrakhan had not necessarily been the primary motivation for attendance, he was in fact quite popular among marchers, and that they were willing or even enthusiastic to see him take a larger role "as an emerging force in national politics" as a result of

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Michael A Fletcher, and Mario A Brossard, "March Has Solid Support of Blacks, Poll Finds," *The Washington Post*, October 5, 1995.

²⁵ "Million Man March Poll" *The Washington Post*, October 15, 1995.

²⁶ Mario A Brossard and Richard Morin, "Leader Popular Among Marchers," *The Washington Post*, October 17, 1995.

the march.²⁷ The *Post* concluded that “Farrakhan was clearly the star of yesterday's march,” with “9 out of 10 men” who held a favorable impression. Those who attended the march, they noted, “were far more willing to see Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan assume a more prominent leadership role in the African American community.” Lu Palmer, a journalist and civil rights leader argued that “a vacuum in national black leadership” had helped Farrakhan emerge as “the preeminent leader in the black community today.” He had won the “confidence” of black men and “will gain greatly and the Nation [of Islam] will gain greatly.”²⁸ The Anti-Defamation League agreed, taking issue with the strategy of affirming the message while questioning or repudiating the messenger. In an official statement they wrote, “It’s an illusion for people to feel that they can participate and endorse this march without in any way showing support for Farrakhan.”²⁹

President Clinton addressed the matter the morning of the march while on a stop in Texas. He applauded the message of “atonement” but condemned Farrakhan. He suggested that Farrakhan’s presence made the march more about “disunity” and separatism, when what was needed was unity. Clinton implicitly called for the march participants to separate themselves from Farrakhan. “One million men are right to stand up for personal responsibility,” he argued, “but one million men do not make right one man’s message of malice and division.” The president argued that there were not “two Americas,” citing the US’s motto: “E Pluribus Unum, out of many, we are one.” Indeed, Clinton suggested that at issue in the march was support for the leader of the Nation of Islam: “Let us pray that those who have spoken for hatred and

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Edward Walsh, “Criticism of Farrakhan's Million Man March Muted,” *The Washington Post*, October 8, 1995.

²⁹ Cohn and Wilgren, “March Foes.”

division in the past will turn away from that past and give voice to the true message of those ordinary Americans who march,” he declared. “If that happens, the men and the women who are there with them will be marching into better lives.” Ironically in making these arguments, Clinton replicated the very themes of nationhood, leadership, and oneness that Farrakhan himself would invoke in his keynote speech at the Million Man March. A speech in which Farrakhan would ask not, *What does it mean to be counted?*, but rather, *What does it mean to count?*

The Prophet’s Tools: Numerology and Space on the National Mall

Rhetorical scholars have argued that Farrakhan responded to attempts to disassociate the message of the Million Man March from him, the messenger, by focusing his keynote speech on the topic of his own authority.³⁰ Pauley notes Farrakhan bolstered his authority in part by positioning himself as an ecumenical prophet, with his speech providing a series of hard and important truths to the African American community and to white Americans, regardless of religious affiliation. In the speech, Farrakhan argued that the black community had clear and legitimate grievances with white America and that division within the black community and its lack of moral direction exacerbated these grievances. Farrakhan emphasized that division and moral deficit required atonement to transform the black community, and potentially the American nation, to a “more perfect union” and a “oneness with God.” White Americans, argued Farrakhan, also required a process of atonement to acknowledge the grievances of the African American community.

These arguments were anchored in *the counting*. Indeed, Pauley noted that numerology was one of the features of Farrakhan’s prophetic discourse, where he would “discern the divine

³⁰ Pauley, “Reshaping Public Persona,” 514-515; Jill M. Weber, “Minister Louis Farrakhan, ‘Million Man March’ (16 October 1995),” *Voices of Democracy* 2 (2007), 170.

pattern in the things around him and interpret the code for his audience.”³¹ Farrakhan positioned himself as prophet, revealing the exclusions of the African American community through a performance of vision in which counting played a key role as it revealed historical truths hidden there on the National Mall. Prophecy was not the only theme used. Farrakhan echoed a tradition of numerology in Islamic mysticism, stating numerology “is a way to understand the principle of unity that underlies everything.”³² Indeed, unity is the key to understanding how Farrakhan framed counting in the speech. Counting is about making connections grounded in place and time. His invocation of numerology set the groundwork for how he understood what it means to be *counted*. In counting from “many” to “one,” Farrakhan divined a nation within a nation.

Rhetorical scholars have approached the analysis of prophetic rhetoric through the category of *ethos*, focusing on the prophet’s “special capacity for truth.”³³ Judgment of prophetic rhetoric, as James Darsey argues, functionally necessitates a judgment of *ethos*, of the person, over the argument or vision in its own right.³⁴ The judgment of *ethos*, as we have seen, was central to the criticisms Farrakhan faced in the lead up to march. In response, as Pauley argued, like many religious prophets, Farrakhan de-emphasized his own role and centered instead on God as a way to bolster his *ethos* and respond to critics. He argued, “you came not at the call of Louis Farrakhan, but you have gathered here at the call of God.” And yet, he added, “there is no human being through whom God brings an idea that history doesn’t marry the idea with that human being no matter what defect.” Farrakhan provided a litany of examples in which the

³¹ Pauley, “Reshaping Public Persona,” 524.

³² Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994), 18.

³³ James Darsey, “The Legend of Eugene Debs: Prophetic Ethos as Radical Argument,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74 (1988): 434-452.

³⁴ James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 29.

separation of the message from the messenger seemed absurd: “you can’t separate Newton from the law that Newton discovered, nor can you separate Einstein from the theory of relativity. It would be silly to try to separate Moses from the Torah or Jesus from the Gospel or Muhammad from the Koran.” Farrakhan clearly argued for the importance of his own role in the march. He ended his argument about the strong connection between message and messenger by asserting, “if my heart were that dark, how is the message so bright, the message so clear, the response so magnificent?”

Yet, notably, in the Islamic tradition—in which only Muhammad could lay claim to be the “messenger of God”—Farrakhan could only use the hallmarks of prophetic rhetoric, but not lay claim to the title. Pauley notes, for example, that in a previous speech Farrakhan disputed the label of “prophet,” calling himself instead a “warner,” and a “man in the mold.”³⁵ Farrakhan reinforced his integral role in the gathering through implicit and explicit references to the magnitude of the crowd. “I called for a million,” Farrakhan boasted, in spite of naysayers who “told me you better change that figure to one more realistic.” He quipped, “I should have changed it to the Three Million Man March.”³⁶ Farrakhan used the size of the march to affirm his prescience.

Prophets provide a *vision*, a truth that the audience lacks and must come to see.³⁷ Farrakhan argued that in order to heal the divide between white and black America, and to heal the suffering within the African American community, the first step of atonement was recognition. For in recognition he contended, “we can’t cover things up, cover them over, give it

³⁵ Pauley, “Reshaping Public Persona,” 518.

³⁶ Louis Farrakhan, “Day of Atonement,” in *Million Man March/Day of Absence: Commemorative Anthology*, eds. Haki R Madhubuti and Maulana Karenga, (Chicago, IL: Third World Press, 1996), 18.

³⁷ Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 29.

a pretty sound to make people feel good. We have to go to the root of the problem.” For Farrakhan, that meant numerological counting, which he offered as a critical tool to reveal the “root” of the mistreatment of African Americans and their exclusion from the American nation. This “root” was hidden in the physical and symbolic foundations of this country.

Farrakhan opened a long reveal of the secrets of numerology on the Mall. The national mall has often been a site in which “Americans learn who they are as citizens, and has served as a gathering space for Americans to speak literally and symbolically to their government.”³⁸ This has been especially true for African Americans, who have often gathered to contest these visions.³⁹ Farrakhan begins with a simple question, “now, where are we gathered?”⁴⁰ He started with a base description “we’re standing at the steps of the United States Capitol,” which transitioned into an appeal to what he could see, “I’m looking at the Washington Monument and beyond it to the Lincoln Memorial.”⁴¹ In the official taped version of the event, the camera pans to the Lincoln Memorial, echoing Farrakhan’s act of seeing, before returning to focus on the stage with a close up of Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam members who stood behind him. The material practices of memorializing offered Farrakhan a tool to ground his narratives about history. He gave vision to the historical figures across time by virtue of their interconnectedness in space on the National Mall, from what “Abraham Lincoln saw in his day, what President Clinton sees in this day. He saw the great divide between Black and White.” Thus, he used the National Mall as a way to make connections.

³⁸ Lucy G. Barber, *Marching on Washington: The Forging of an American Political Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

³⁹ Charles Green and Basil Wilson, “Marches on Washington and the Black Protest Movement,” *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work* 16, no. 3 (2007), 201.

⁴⁰ Farrakhan, “Day of Atonement,” 19.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

Setting a scene using solely what the eyes could see was seemingly not enough for Farrakhan, for it did not readily disclose the mysteries of history, the things “unheard” or “unseen”. To achieve the mystical, Farrakhan used the symbolism of numbers to make connections between seemingly unrelated ideas, figures, or events. Following the invocation of Lincoln’s vision of America’s racial divide, Farrakhan turned to the material features of the Lincoln Memorial. He noted that both the Jefferson and Lincoln Memorials were “19 feet high,” citing a “deep significance” of the number nineteen. This significance, however, required more than recognition of numbers, it required a calculation. If the memorials are both nineteen feet high, “19” then becomes significant in a connection between two historical figures. Farrakhan combined Lincoln “the sixteenth president” with “Jefferson, the third” to add, “16 and 3 make 19 again.”⁴² He then separated the numbers he had previously added, beginning with “when you have a nine, you have a womb that is pregnant. And when you have a one standing by the nine, it means that there’s something secret that has to be unfolded.”⁴³ The “secret” that reaches into the foundations of the mall begins with the slaves who “were brought right here on this mall in chains to be sold up and down the eastern seaboard.”⁴⁴ And on that same mall, George Washington “laid the foundation, the cornerstone of this capitol building where we stand,” and “George was a slave owner.”⁴⁵ At the same time as the “secret” foundations of slavery were revealed, the “the pregnant womb” also revealed a moment that was “pregnant with the possibility of tremendous change in our status in America and in the world.”⁴⁶ Washington feared that the “slave would prove to become a most troublesome species of property,” and, “the

⁴² Ibid., 10.

⁴³ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 19.

day that these presidents feared has now come to pass,” because, “on this mall, here we stand.”⁴⁷ For Farrakhan, numerology revealed the hidden history of slavery and foretold the triumph of the march.

Farrakhan performed such calculations again and again in the first half of his speech. The hidden history of American slavery was visible, for example, in the Washington Monument: “there, in the middle of this mall is the Washington Monument . . . 555 feet high.”⁴⁸ Once more, the video follows Farrakhan’s vision, panning to the monument. “If we put a 1 in front of that 555 feet,” he calculated, “we get 1555, the year that our first fathers landed on the shores of Jamestown, Virginia as slaves.”⁴⁹ Littering the mall were hidden histories of the black man, namely slavery. Hidden also was a more positive history of the influence of Egypt on the symbols of the National Mall. Farrakhan moved from “this obelisk at the Washington Monument, which is Egyptian” to the Egyptian design of the official seal, to the *original* design of “a coat of arms” which originally “measured in six quarters,” a number he declares “is significant.”⁵⁰ Farrakhan’s numerous numerological calculations brought him to the Egyptian pharaoh, who Farrakhan claimed was the first to institute the worship of “a- ton, the one god,” who was of course “symbolized by a sun disk with 19 rays coming out of that sun.”⁵¹ Over and over he repeated the pattern: invoking place to give way to vision, and vision to hidden meanings and mysteries, through the art of counting. This counting revealed hidden narratives, but it also eventually ended with one final calculation. The “a” in “A-ton,” Farrakhan explained,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

“equals 440” in musical tones, but also “one” as “the first letter in the alphabet.”⁵² The culmination of all of Farrakhan’s numerological calculation of the mall was “a-ton” both God and *one*.

This is rhetorically enhanced in Farrakhan’s repetitions. Just before his lengthy argument about the more perfect union, he centered the marchers again in their place on the National Mall. The march and the ground on which they “stand” helped to make a connection beyond those present:

“And so, we stand here today at this historic moment. We are standing in the place of those who could not make it here today. We are standing on the blood of our ancestors. We are standing on the blood of those who died in the Middle Passage, who died in the fields and swamps of America, who died hangin’ from trees in the South, who died in the cells of their jailers, who died on the highways and who died in the fratricidal conflict that rages within our community.”⁵³

The repetition of “we are standing on” connects marchers directly to the sacred ground. That ground, and their responsibility, was rooted not in the grand statues of Lincoln, or Washington. Instead, it was grounded in the sacrifice of those who stood on American soil, and who sacrificed.

The numerological calculations about the National Mall, Farrakhan argued, also allowed for the revelations of another form of “mythic” calculation of “one,” this time a far more conventional form of civic math towards the one nation. Farrakhan used the original design for the official seal of the United States as a way to talk about the true intentions behind the language of nationhood. The original design, a “coat of arms measured in six quarters,” was

⁵² Ibid., 19.

⁵³ Ibid., 30.

meant to symbolize “England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Germany and Holland, the countries from which the new nation had been peopled.”⁵⁴ Missing from this design, pointed out Farrakhan, were Native Americans, African Americans, and any number of other “undesirable” populations for the founding fathers. The eventual design featured an Egyptian pyramid, again hiding the influence of the black man and the slave from the history presented on the mall. For Farrakhan, the original design reflected the logic in the motto that would later be placed on the Seal, “*E Pluribus Unum*” - out of many, one. In his words, the “Seal and the Constitution reflected the thinking of the founding fathers, that this was to be a nation by White people and for White people.”⁵⁵

In Farrakhan’s message, the fundamental barrier to “oneness” was not just division, but also a lack of recognition. He was attempting to provide prophetic vision on the mall and a first step toward recognizing the calculations “towards” the “one.” Farrakhan made another connection from Washington to President Clinton, who “spoke today and he wanted to heal the great divide.”⁵⁶ However Farrakhan argued, “...I respectfully suggest to the President, you did not dig deep enough at the malady that divides Black and White in order to affect a solution to the problem. And so, today, we have to deal with the root so that perhaps a healing can take place.”⁵⁷ Farrakhan offers Clinton a choice. *Perhaps* he might have recognized the root of the problem. He addressed Clinton’s words directly; arguing his reference to “E Pluribus Unum” Farrakhan aligned their goals. He asked, “do you mean for them to be made into the one,” and if

⁵⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

so, “someone must ensure that “truth has to be spoken to justice.”⁵⁸ In Farrakhan’s estimation, Clinton and the white establishment who critiqued him lacked the vision that Farrakhan imparted to the marchers, and would fail to recognize the real barrier to creating the one nation. Numerology, with its capacity to see the truth, but also to *transform* towards oneness was a precursor to the unity necessary for nation making.

“And Why Have We Come”: The Many and the One Nation

The transformation of the American civic body into an American *nation* as a whole served as a transition point in the speech. Even as Farrakhan critiqued the conventional process of nation making that excluded the African American community, he embraced the language and *counting* of “oneness.” The end goal of the process of atonement was unity. Americans and more specifically the African American community needed a transformation “towards a more perfect union,” and ultimately, towards a “oneness with God.”⁵⁹ Arguments about “oneness” or the “nation,” typically involve the transcendence of difference. Transcendence promotes unity by ignoring the disagreements between two parties on a specific issue and providing an alternative possibility for similarity.⁶⁰ Farrakhan used the presence of the march on the national mall to unite them and transcend their differences. Physical presence at the march was key to how Farrakhan framed the outcomes of the march and the progress “towards a more perfect union” of black men. The National Mall setting was not simply a space of civic history, but a means of

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Mary Boor Tonn, “Militant Motherhood: Labor's Mary Harris 'Mother' Jones,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 82, no. 1 (1996), 2.

revealing hidden histories of oppression that served a different kind of unity. Farrakhan seized upon the mall as a means of making black Americans a true nation.⁶¹

Farrakhan positioned the unity of the marchers as central to the meaning of the march. This began with positioning unity as a motivation for attending the march. Farrakhan posed a rhetorical question to marchers “And why did we come?” He answered, “we came because we want to move toward a more perfect union.” He identified unity as a “social benefit of our gathering here today.” As an outcome of the march, “from this day forward, we can never again see ourselves through the narrow eyes of the limitation of the boundaries of our own fraternal, civic, political, religious, street organization or professional organization.” Division was an outside force that could be transcended by gathering, “look at our division, not here, out there. We as a people, who have been fractured, divided and destroyed.” In seeing the mass, Farrakhan claimed to see no division, only connection. Only one. The mass of marchers was *singular*, a *Million Man*: “a sea of peace. A sea of tranquility. A sea of men ready to come back to God.” Later in the speech, Farrakhan invoked the vision of the gathering, arguing “we are forced by the magnitude of what we see here today” to transform future behavior as well. He continued, “whenever you return to your cities and you see a black man, a black woman, don’t ask him what is your social, political or religious affiliation, or what is your status? Know that he is your brother.”⁶² Oneness, then, was made possible by the mass of marchers, but it is also predicated on the capacity to see the mass as one, and to adjust their vision moving forward.

Even as attendance at the rally seemed to *unify* the assembled group of African American men, Farrakhan argued that unification was far from complete. As with numerology, Farrakhan unpacked the meaning of a “more perfect union” to reveal its significance for the marchers. He

⁶¹ Green and Wilson, “Marches on Washington,” 201.

⁶² Farrakhan, “Day of Atonement,” 17.

emphasized the importance of a long and not fully realized process “towards a more perfect union” and reiterating that “we’re in progress toward a perfect union.”⁶³ The atonement he called the march to achieve was the mechanism to achieve this progress. He spent the next section of the speech outlining eight steps to “atonement” that would accomplish the task of moving towards a union. The first two steps were “pointing out” and “acknowledging” the “faults,” something that Farrakhan had already performed in the first half of the speech, using numerology to reveal the fault lines of division in the black and white communities of the nation. He also offered his own list of faults of the African American community, ranging from a disregarding of their responsibilities in the home and community, to drinking and crime. He urged the “acceptance of responsibility,” repentance, and a change going forward. The steps of atonement and the progress to a “more perfect union” of the black nation, he argued, would not only heal the black community but “call America and the world to repentance.” This would bring all closer to atonement and to the perfect union.

Conclusion

I have analyzed how Farrakhan used numerology to develop an argument about the hidden symbolism of the National Mall. These symbols provide a template for a hidden history of the black man, in his triumphs and his mistreatment. Farrakhan counted, calculated, and led marchers through the first step in the process of atonement, the recognition and acknowledgement of ills. Where this dissertation explores calls to be counted, Farrakhan’s certainly provides a distinct answer to the question of *how* Americans have been counted. As bizarre and occasionally circular as Farrakhan’s uptake of numerology was, it provided a clear pattern. Farrakhan’s distinct approach to numerology was grounded in counting as a

⁶³ Ibid., 13.

transformational process of moving towards unity and towards “one”; whether that is “a-ton,” or “nation.” The final—and arguably most important— calculation Farrakhan attempted to reveal through numerology was the fundamental process of nation building, the creation of “one nation under God.” The original *transformation* of the many to the one nation may have excluded the black man, but for Farrakhan, the logic of nationhood like the logic of his unique brand of numerology still provided a blue print towards one. Oneness described the “sea of black men,” at the march and provided the march its spiritual aspirations.

Farrakhan embraced the logic of nation making, the mythical process by which the “many” become the “one.” The logic of the one nation distinguishes Farrakhan’s approach to counting as much as his embrace of numerology. Creating the nation, like Farrakhan’s brand of numerology, positioned counting as a kind of alchemy. The process by which “many” became “one” relied on a transformation that transcended a concern for the many at all, or their differences. This was a language distinct from democracy, with a concern for the majority or minority. Majoritarian logic is premised on recognition of difference. What mattered was the nation. The nation in this argument was not a “whole,” or a majority. Nationhood presumes belonging and the language of citizenship is almost always predicated on exclusions of the “other.”

And yet, if Farrakhan’s theme is the nation, the question of the progress of the American nation towards the perfect union remained unresolved at the end of the speech. There are after all two divisions revealed through the *hidden* calculations on the National Mall; the American nation, and the one Farrakhan envisioned, the African American “nation.” If oneness with God served as the final step of atonement, the slippage between the spiritual language of atonement

and the “more perfect union,” implied that the unity found within the “sea of black men,” was definitely something more like nation than community.

Farrakhan’s construction of the black and white nation is perhaps best understood as part of a long and varied tradition of black nationalism in the United States.⁶⁴ Farrakhan had, prior to the march, often been an advocate for emigration and the creation of a black nation state. The Million Man March has often been read as Farrakhan’s shift to the mainstream, in the embrace of a more integrationist rhetoric.⁶⁵ Michael West argues that Farrakhan exemplified the increasingly popular strain of cultural nationalism, which rejected an “active political program” for a focus on “cultural rebirth.”⁶⁶ As Dexter Gordon argues, Farrakhan’s rejection of a political program was “core ideology,” of the march in so far as it placed the emphasis on “black self-definition and self-determination.”⁶⁷ Numerology helped *count*, and indeed for Farrakhan, *correct* the civic myths and symbols that ground our understanding of the American nation. Rather than look at history as recited by white voices, he sought to paint a picture of the oft memorialized mall from the perspective of black men. Farrakhan sought to create a black nation by laying the same foundations upon which the American nation was formed; through the creation of shared myths, symbols, and histories, written in this case by the black nation. Ironically, where Farrakhan

⁶⁴Michael O. West, “The Million Man March and the Black Nationalist Tradition in the United States,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 12, no. 1 (1999), 84-85. As West succinctly puts “while persistent, Black Nationalism has not been consistent; that is, its actual impact on African Americans has varied in time and space.” West argues for four moments in which Black Nationalism gained significant traction such to challenge the dominant integrationist rhetoric, one of which is the Million Man March, a “golden event” in a moment of resurgence for Black Nationalism in the United States, longer after the 1920s which marked the end of a 75 year golden age.

⁶⁵ Pauley, “Reshaping Public Persona,” 90.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Dexter Gordon, *Black Identity: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalism* (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2003), 1.

centered on oneness, his logic of black nationhood essentially argued for *two* nations, a black nation *within* the American nation.

And it is not just white Americans that are excluded from the nation. The creation of the shared history, and the shared *vision* of the black nation provided through Farrakhan's prophetic vision is a precursor to the "perfect union." After all, without the first step of "recognition," atonement is not possible. Criticisms of the march and/or of Farrakhan are outside forces that sow "disunity." In doing so, Farrakhan collapsed legitimate critiques of his anti-Semitic comments, or his gendered hierarchy with the negative stereotypes of the black community. The centrality of the shared vision attempted to forestall criticism of any kind.

CHAPTER 5: THE “FLASH CAMPAIGN”: COUNTING AS PUBLIC OPINION AND DEMAND, IN MOVEON’S 1998 ONLINE PETITION CAMPAIGN

MoveOn’s 1998 “Censure Clinton and Move On” online petition campaign opposed the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. They argued instead for a compromise position of censure which would allow the nation to “move on.” The campaign represented a new form of calls to be counted on the American political scene and was hugely popular for its time.¹ Within five days of its appearance, nearly 250,000 people had signed the petition and within a few more weeks, nearly 500,000. In interviews, Joan Blades—who founded MoveOn along with her husband Wes Boyd—celebrated the platform as representing the future of what would soon be called “digital democracy.” E-mail, with its ease of transmission through “word of mouse,” she argued allowed for the emergence of a new kind of political activist, the “five-minute activist.”² MoveOn described the online petition as a “flash campaign,” creating a buzzword that became popular to describe a new style of internet-based activism and fundraising in which large-scale participation could be achieved in short periods of time. MoveOn was later dubbed the quintessential “netroots” organization, a combination internet and grassroots campaign without a physical location or a large staff.³

Whether it was “five-minute activist” or the “flash campaign,” these phrases provided more than pithy promotional phrases, they served as organizing metaphors for MoveOn’s view of emerging possibilities for democratic participation in the age of the Internet. MoveOn’s 1998 petition campaign exemplified what Damian Pfister identifies as the process wherein early

¹ MoveOn.org referred to throughout as MoveOn.

² Chris Car, “On-line Call Against Impeachment is On Fire,” *The Washington Post*, February 1, 1999.

³ David Karpf, “Netroots Goes Global,” *The Nation*, November 4, 2013, 22.

adoption of a new technology “exert[s] outsized influence in how citizens imagine the democratic potential,” which “subtly shapes subsequent citizen participation.”⁴ Pfister argues that this influence is not strictly technical; it is rhetorical, shaping how citizens talk about and within a democracy.

In February 1999, MoveOn announced their plans to “move on” to other. Blades and Boyd argued that the actions of Congress during the impeachment proceedings were indicative of a more general failure of politicians to adequately respond to the concerns of their constituents. America needed a “democratic renaissance,” and government needed a renewed commitment to representing “our voice.” MoveOn sought to fuel a more sustained democratic movement, an ambitious project for what began as a single-issue online petition campaign for the “five-minute activist” that emphasized brief and fleeting engagement.⁵ Skeptics labeled MoveOn a product of “clicktivism,” a technological version of slack activism, or slacktivism. Clicktivism was a particular favorite of news coverage of the campaign, which alternatively celebrated and denigrated the emerging practices of digital activism.

To transform a “flash campaign” into a “democratic renaissance,” MoveOn *counted*. The list of ways that MoveOn could, and did, count was lengthy. MoveOn counted signatures on petitions, but it also counted the broader opinions, demographics, and political affiliations of its “members.” MoveOn also counted the actions—or in their parlance, the *activities*—of petition signers, from phone calls to Congress to flag raising. The ease by which they were able to collect information about supporters and petition supporters was reflective of the capacities of networked technology. The internet emerged into the public sphere in the 1990s as a new kind of

⁴ Damian Pfister, *Networked Media, Networked Rhetorics: Attention and Deliberation in the Early Blogosphere* (University Park, Penn State University Press, 2014), 6.

⁵ David Plotz, “The Five Minute Activist,” *Slate*, December 22, 1999.

“mass media” in which the “mass” could be broken down, itemized, categorized, and reprocessed in public discourse as a (very large) set of discrete actions. Indeed, what made MoveOn particularly noteworthy in the early stages of internet activism is not—or at least not *just*—the range of actions that could quite literally be counted, but the readiness with which these counts could be folded into public discourse.

In this chapter, I look at the rhetoric of counting in MoveOn’s campaigns, focusing on the initial 1998 campaign opposing President Clinton’s impeachment. I argue that MoveOn presented censure as a compromise position, and reinforced this by emphasizing the diversity of petition signers, particularly in political affiliation, and by publicizing the opinions and even emotions of signers. Of course, they counted these as well. In turn, MoveOn presented counting as a means of creating loose alliances. These alliances, they argued, were reflective of the *majority* support for censure, but also the ideal political landscape for Congress and for citizens. Percentages, averages, and ratios allowed MoveOn to modulate differences among petition supporters and to reinforce the rhetoric of majoritarianism. Claims to *degree* also presented the opportunity for MoveOn to segment activities in short episodes of time as a way to demonstrate the intensity and immediacy of movement responses, in much the same way suffragists used a rhetoric of place and accumulat^o.

This chapter focuses on the first six months of the 1998 anti-impeachment campaign, which I will simply call the “1998 campaign” or “1998 petition.” I begin my analysis with the beginning of the campaign in September 1998 and end it with the announcement of MoveOn.org as an official organization in February 1999, shortly after the US Senate voted down the articles of impeachment. My primary object of study or “text” in this chapter is the MoveOn website

over the course of these six months.⁶ I read it iteratively, over time, just as internet users would have encountered it. My analysis focuses on how the campaign used the website as a means of recruiting new supporters. As part of this analysis, I look at key pages within the site: the homepage, the FAQ page, and the volunteer resources page. I also look at the talking points and press statements of MoveOn organizers.

MoveOn and Digital Activism in the 1990s

MoveOn was founded against a backdrop of President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial. In 1994, Clinton faced a civil trial that extended for four years over sexual harassment claims by Paula Jones. In the process, Clinton would be accused of attempting to cover up a 1995 affair with Monica Lewinsky, an intern in the White House. Clinton's conduct during the trial would eventually lead to him being only the second President to be impeached. In September, independent counsel Ken Starr delivered a report to the House alleging ten potential sources of misconduct that were impeachable. In December, the House Judiciary Committee would ultimately recommend to proceed with two charges: obstruction of justice, and lying under oath. Clinton was impeached in the House on December 19, 1998. A subsequent trial began in the Senate on January 7, where Clinton was acquitted five weeks later.

MoveOn.org was created on September 22, 1998 by Blades and Boyd just a few weeks after Starr's report was filed. The couple aimed to leverage their previous work in Silicon Valley in marketing and software development toward political activism—they had built expertise and significant personal wealth by creating and selling the profitable software company Berkeley Systems, where Boyd served as a technical expert and CEO, and Blades was the Vice President

⁶ I use archival materials retrieved through the Internet Archives' WayBack Machine. The Internet Archive periodically crawls websites and captures any text, links, and most multimedia posted. You can, in other words, navigate MoveOn.org much like you would have in 1998.

of Marketing. Their technological savvy and wealth allowed them to build a popular petition campaign without the organizational structure or financial investment often required of “offline” petition campaigns. David Karpf argues that Boyd and Blades approached MoveOn much like a tech start up, rather than a traditional activist organization, privileging “a culture of ongoing experimentation and technological innovation.”⁷ Boyd and Blades relied heavily on their website as a source of organizing, information, and recruitment. They also relied on techniques that would become hallmarks of digital marketing: banners, clicks, regular contact, opportunities for interaction, and so on—all of which would rely on an infrastructure of various metrics. But it was not just the new tools of Silicon Valley that shaped their campaign. It was the optimistic tone of the Valley; over and over, Blades and Boyd framed technology as the key to solving the problems of democracy and partisanship exemplified for them by the impeachment proceedings.

MoveOn’s 1998 petition was comprised of a simple web-based form where individuals could enter their name, e-mail, zip code, and additional comments. MoveOn relied primarily on e-mail as a means of popularizing the petition, starting with Blade and Boyd’s own personal networks, and urging supporters to circulate the petition outward to their friends, family, and colleagues. MoveOn’s homepage featured a brief paragraph about MoveOn’s general purpose and the one-sentence text of the petition: “The Congress must immediately Censure President Clinton and Move On to pressing issues facing the country.” Most significantly, the homepage featured an updated running count of petition e-signatures. Here visitors to the website could see the campaign in action through an explicit display of aggregation.

In addition MoveOn maintained several pages where individuals could seek further information about the campaign. The homepage featured a link to the *Frequently Asked*

⁷ David Karpf, *The MoveOn Effect: The Unexpected Transformation of American Political Advocacy* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 27.

Questions page in both the navigation bar at the top of the page and as a hyperlinked resource at the bottom. The FAQ included basic information about the organization, and a running timeline of the campaign. The MoveOn website also featured a “press room” with quotations and links to news stories about the campaign, a volunteer page that included talking points about the campaign, and an example of the paper petition and e-mail that would be sent to Congress. (Names were compiled, printed out, and delivered to key Congressional representatives. Participants could also request that a digital copy of the petition, along with comments, be forwarded to their Congressional representatives).

In the early stages of the campaign, MoveOn sought not only to promote their petition, but to overcome initial ignorance and skepticism about the nature and efficacy of online petitions. That is to say, Blade, Boyd, and their group had to engage simultaneously in two forms of public advocacy: anti-impeachment advocacy *and* championing on-line “activism,” which was seen as less than fully credible, particularly given the inconsistencies of form, circulation, and delivery to government officials. In 1999 the *New York Times* said of MoveOn that “petitions that circulate on the Internet are an iffy proposition. Many of them, no matter how lofty the cause, smack of spam. Understandably, people often ignore them.”⁸ It was not only the *New York Times* that expressed skepticism: other media outlets did the same, spanning the possibilities of internet-based political activism.⁹ E-mail petitions of the time were often seen as unreliable, impersonal, and limited in their efficacy; all of these were rhetorical constraints MoveOn had to address.

⁸ Katie Hafner, “Mobilizing Online for Gun Control,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 1999.

⁹Plotz, “The Five Minute Activist.”

Counting as Compromise

Though polls showed that much of the public opposed impeachment, people did so for a variety of conflicting reasons. So too did MoveOn supporters. Given the variety of motives behind anti-impeachment sentiment, MoveOn faced an initial challenge of creating a non-partisan sense of unity for their campaign. Within several years, the organization would become explicitly progressive in its politics—in 1998 and 1999, however, MoveOn’s campaign was still largely aimed at a non-partisan audience. To display such unity, MoveOn tailored its message to demonstrate support for “moving on” among Republicans. During the Senate hearings in the winter of 1999, for example, MoveOn emphasized Republican participation in the campaign. On their FAQ page, they argued that the campaign had “created a site that the broadest group of citizens can support.” Elsewhere, they tried to draw a distinction between the question of Clinton’s guilt and that of its remedy, acknowledging that not everyone they represented agreed about Clinton’s guilt; still, petition supporters were unified around skepticism about impeachment.¹⁰

MoveOn thus embraced strategic ambiguity. This ambiguity was apparent in the broad language they used to argue for censure rather than impeachment, as well as in the ways the campaign steered around explicit discussion of Clinton, Lewinsky, or Starr’s accusations. This was reflected in the text of the petition, which stated “The Congress must immediately **Censure** President Clinton *and Move On* to pressing issues facing the country.” The argument was pragmatic: rather than impeachment, the movement’s faithful felt Congress needed to address the truly “pressing issues” before the country. What were these “pressing issues?” These too were

¹⁰ MoveOn, “Frequently Asked Questions,” *MoveOn.org*, February 18, 1999. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990218191833/http://www.moveon.org:80/faq.htm>

ambiguous, allowing for a broad range of possibilities. A statement published on the website after the House impeachment vote framed the issues in the most generic terms:

Despite strong public disapproval, the Congress has impeached the President.

Now the President faces trial in the Senate. This is not in the best interests of our country. We face real economic and foreign policy challenges. A besieged

President and distracted Congress will not address these issues. Through this web page, ordinary citizens are organizing to demand that our congressional representatives lead us out of this mess.¹¹

The campaign, nominally about Congress “moving on,” refused to define explicitly that to which Congress was supposed to move on. There was not even a defense of Clinton. It was strictly a matter of opposing impeachment as a formal matter. Such ambiguity would seem to undermine the case; yet, it was clear that MoveOn saw ambiguity as a way to aggregate as many supporters as possible, irrespective of their more basic motivations or political commitments.¹²

This was a rhetoric of compromise. MoveOn emphasized compromise by counting in the percentages, ratios, and averages that defined the range of opinions and demographic characteristics of anti-impeachment supporters while still using the *whole* to create the appearance of unified opposition. In the process, MoveOn portrayed the movement as a tentative and provisional alliance best described through differences, yet best understood through unified opposition to impeachment. This was consistent with what MoveOn increasingly offered as their

¹¹ MoveOn, “Censure and Move On,” *MoveOn.org*, Dec 12 1998. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/19981212031127/http://www.moveon.org:80/>

¹² A number of similar campaigns, both for and against, focused a great deal of attention on listing the ills of impeachment, or of President Clinton. EnoughisEnough.org, another popular impeachment website, for example, presented pages of reasons why impeachment was harmful, including lists of specific issues that were being ignored, and plenty of fairly strong statements on representatives who proceeded in spite of these harms.

representative function: rather than shaping public opinion, they presented themselves as simply articulating it.

The most concrete argument MoveOn made about Clinton and impeachment was that the only proper response was compromise. Compromise—which would take the form of formal censure—reflected, they argued, not only the interests but the beliefs of a wide swath of Americans. The petition, they argued, brought together a mass of individuals from a range of political parties, and a range of opinions on Clinton, the impeachment proceedings, and even censure, but were willing to sign on regardless. MoveOn supported this claim by centering difference, even as they argued for the unity of the membership in the collective act of signing the petition. MoveOn used the counts of petition supporters as the primary means to maintain unity while emphasizing difference. These counts took two forms, first in counts of the sentiments expressed in comments from petition supporters to build a “unity of purpose” and second, in demographic data which allowed MoveOn to emphasize the diversity of supporters while still maintaining a sense of the whole.

MoveOn began by emphasizing the range of opinions and beliefs among campaign supporters. For example, in October 1998 they described the campaign as comprised of “450,000 individuals” who “have 450,000 different opinions as to the perfect solution.”¹³ In a FAQ page answer to the question of who has signed the petition, MoveOn stressed the different viewpoints and motives of the petition’s supporters:

Liberals who would rather not Censure the President have signed because they believe this is the best way to gain consensus and return our legislative and

¹³ MoveOn, “Talking Points,” *MoveOn.org*, October 3, 1998. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/19991003055540/http://www.moveon.org/talkingpoints.htm>

executive branch to the business of governing. Likewise, there are conservatives who would rather remove the President from office but are more concerned about the danger of allowing the impeachment process to distract our representatives for a protracted partisan fight.¹⁴

MoveOn did not limit the reasons to these two basic liberal and conservative positions. Rather they emphasized the wide range of people's opinions, linking to a "top 100 comments page," as what they described as "the best way to get a sense of the participants." The range of "unedited" comments that followed offered conflicting views of Clinton—for example, "Clinton and his team are doing a great job," as compared to "Clinton is an ass." Some specified the "pressing issues" that needed to take precedent over impeachment, from "terrorism" to the "farm economy." Other comments expressed "reservation," even directly arguing, "I don't even think he should be censured."¹⁵ These "unedited" comments therefore articulated the range of public opinion as itself an ambiguous matter, all toward an argument for the formal compromise of censure over impeachment.

MoveOn placed demographic differences among supporters at the forefront of their representation of the campaign. They regularly counted support for their cause in the form of percentages, averages, and ratios. For example, they reported, "150,000 constituent communications have been logged, an average of 350 messages for each member of Congress."¹⁶

¹⁴ MoveOn, "Frequently Asked Questions," *MoveOn.org*, February 18, 1999. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990218191833/http://www.moveon.org:80/faq.htm>

¹⁵ MoveOn, "First 100 or So Comments," *MoveOn.org*, May 3, 1999. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990218191833/http://www.moveon.org:80/faq.htm>

¹⁶ MoveOn, "Constituent's comments delivered to Judiciary Committee," *MoveOn.org*, October 4, 1998. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, archived May 3, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990503142442/http://www.moveon.org/release1004.htm>

The simple calculation of the total communication from constituents against the number of representatives in Congress implied that MoveOn members not only outnumbered congressional representatives, but were geographically diverse. MoveOn also aimed to portray the differences in the campaign through party affiliation, emphasizing what they described as the “bipartisan” nature of the campaign. “[A] survey,” they boasted, “taken of our members show almost 40% to be Republican or Independent.” They also offered a lengthy list of supporter characteristics in a November 1998 press release, drawing on the already established rhetoric of an “open” internet.

Mirroring the demographics of the Internet itself, members are younger than average, with more than one-third under thirty-five years of age. Reaching one Republican supporter for every six Democrats, self-described Independent voters make up more than 30% of members. Nearly ten percent of members are first-time voters. More than sixty percent of members answered yes to, “Did impeachment hearings affect your vote?” The highest impact was felt in highly Internet connected states like New York and California—31% of MoveOn.org signers live in California and 11% in New York.¹⁷

Upon closer examination, this list is difficult to parse. What is the relationship between the 31% of Californians, and the first-time voters, for example? In what way did the impeachment hearings affect votes? Parsing, however, was not the point: Like Louis Farrakhan’s numerology, MoveOn counted so as to count as one, lumping all manner of demographic information—from party affiliation, to geography, to voting record—into a singular anti-impeachment declaration.

¹⁷ MoveOn, “Internet organizing rocks election,” *MoveOn.org*, November 6, 1998. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, archived May 3, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990503142442/http://www.moveon.org/release1004.htm>

Through demographic renderings, MoveOn's membership could be represented as diverse and still be counted as one.

This unity was best understood as a shared *emotional* state in spite of the differences MoveOn argued were central. MoveOn's summed up the lessons from the campaign, and concluded "in general, the comments [on the petition] document a deep sense of frustration and anger."¹⁸ MoveOn demonstrated their point through a simple but effective count of common words and phrases in the comments. For example, MoveOn argued the message delivered by the petitions to Representatives could be understood through those first 100 comments, where "'Enough is enough!' and 'Enough already!' competed for the honor of most frequent comment."¹⁹ "Enough" provided an example of this frustration. The framing of frequency aimed to create unity through a shared emotional response. MoveOn reported on a more thorough analysis of the full 150,000 petitions in early October, "sixty-four percent" of which included a comment. MoveOn developed a press release to draw attention to the delivery of comments to members. The substance of these comments was described largely through counts of sentiments, which were similarly focused on creating a sense of unity in emotion. MoveOn again framed the "tone" of the comments by quantifying emotion response, which ranged "from frustration, to anger, hope, disgust, fear, and even humor." The proof was further quantified in concrete counts of the frequency of phrases. For example, that "the word 'enough' appeared 19,293 times" or that "'hope' runs a close second."²⁰ MoveOn used counts of phrases to argue that these

¹⁸ MoveOn, "Censure and Move On flash campaign takes fire," *MoveOn.org*, September 23, 1998. Available through the *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, archived May 3, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990503110007/http://www.moveon.org/September%2023%20Release.htm>

¹⁹ MoveOn, "Constituent's comments delivered to Judiciary Committee," *MoveOn.org*, October 4, 1998. Available through the *Internet Archive Wayback Machine*, archived May 3, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990503142442/http://www.moveon.org/release1004.htm>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

comments could be understood as a whole in spite of their differences. Thus, the emphasis on difference was tempered by this shared rhetorical language in response to the circumstances.

Percentages and ratios, as compared to flat counts are more easily comparable. If it is difficult to imagine how 180,000 of 450,000 petition supporters compared to the US population, it is much easier to slide between 40% of Republicans and Independents as a measure. MoveOn, for example, concluded that where “more than one-third” of supporters that were “under thirty-five years of age,” and that the petition participants were on average, “younger than the population,” of voters. If MoveOn was younger, and thus not quite fully representative, they could, and did, make similar calculations about their membership that was transferrable to the broader population. The percentages of party affiliation, or age, or geography mimicked the ways in which polling today represents the national electorate. Thus, MoveOn claimed the campaign represented the prevailing public opinion and that their petition participants could be said to be representative of the broader population.

Analysis reveals that percentages, in particular, are a way to reference the part while still maintaining the place in the one, the 100%. MoveOn aimed to position the campaign as a function of a plurality acting as a unity, however partial. It was not simply that Independents and Republicans were a part of the whole, but they were a part that could be understood *in relation* to Democrats through the petition. MoveOn argued explicitly that the range of opinions demonstrated by supporters, and particularly by the comments, reflected a necessary “centrist” or “common-ground” compromise. In framing user comments, for example, MoveOn argued they reflected “a diversity of backgrounds and a unity of purpose.” The comments highlighted “diverse backgrounds and reactions, yet strong consensus,” MoveOn wrote in a press

statement.²¹ Again a pragmatic argument designed, as Blades argued, to work toward compromise as the “best chance of moving forward.” Indeed, it could be said that for Blades, diversity and unity were not values in themselves so much as they were means of persuading audiences of MoveOn to persuade Congress to move from impeachment to censure.

Despite the ambiguity of the official petition, MoveOn did not embrace ambiguity in order to transcend the potential differences of supporters. Instead, they argued the significance of the signatures in the campaign was the diversity of participants. MoveOn is often cited as an example of a trend towards informal associations with political organizations, where membership is loosely defined, and often focuses on specific campaigns rather than identification with the organization.²² MoveOn’s “loose” association was clear in its “unity of purpose.” The shared emotion and shared “purpose,” was best understood because of, rather than in spite of, these differences. MoveOn claimed and counted supporters as more of an alliance than a fundamental sameness. The wide array of characteristics of supporters – in the range of reasons to support censure as well as the diversity in party affiliation— demonstrated a compromise. The petition was not a partisan demand, or even a unified position on censure. It was in practice what MoveOn demanded Congress should find: compromise.

Focusing the Opinions of the Majority

MoveOn argued compromise was reflected in the public sentiment of the country as a whole, not just among MoveOn supporters. MoveOn frequently referenced public opinion, explicitly referring to polls. They constructed a sense of a collective national chorus, of which

²¹ Ibid.

²² Carty, Victoria. “Bridging Contentious and Electoral Politics: MoveOn and the Digital Revolution.” *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* Volume 30, ed., Patrick G. Coy (Bingley, UK: Emerald Insight, 2010), 171-196.

they were but one part, and explicitly and implicitly argued that their efforts were supported by a much broader base of supporters than those 450,000 who actively participated in the MoveOn campaign by signing the 1998 petition. By positioning the campaign as a “mediator” of public opinion, MoveOn’s members become a stand in for the broader American electorate.

In the very first stages of its campaign, MoveOn argued Congress should not impeach Clinton because of prevailing public opinion. On the FAQ page, MoveOn argued, “the vast majority of the American public understands that a continuing obsession with scandal will do great damage to our institutions, our economy, and our power and prestige in the world.” They continued, “we expect our representatives to understand this as well, and show true leadership.”²³ MoveOn did not simply present the petition as representing majority sentiment, they called on their participants to demonstrate that sentiment through online actions. Opinion on the matter of impeachment was already settled: Americans and Congress, they argued, already knew the opinions of the “vast majority” and knew of the “public disapproval.” Online action was a means of “focus[ing] a broad and deep consensus in the American public”²⁴ In so doing they suggested that their role was simply to channel rather than to change public opinion.

By positioning MoveOn as mediating public opinion, the group was able to argue that the relationship between supporters and the broader public had the form of a part-to-whole, at least with respect to the majority of Americans. MoveOn presented itself as a majoritarian movement. The purpose of the campaign was to provide an outlet for and bring attention to majority opinion. This is likely what they meant by “to focus” and other analogous verbs. The goal of the “flash campaign,” as MoveOn described it, was to “to collect” and “to crystallize,” or “to mediate,” all

²³ MoveOn “Frequently Asked Questions.”

²⁴ Even after MoveOn announced their two-year plan to develop a grassroots organization, this phrasing stayed, swapping “is” for “was” and dropping “can” from “we can focus a broad and deep consensus,” for a stronger claim that “*we focus* a broad and deep consensus.”

terms that indicate MoveOn's role as an intermediary to the public and the opinions expressed in the campaign as reflective of that public. MoveOn stated, "In the campaign's first two weeks, by mediating constituent feedback, *MoveOn.org* has delivered over 250,000 emails and over 20,000 hardcopy pages of constituent comments directly to House members and to the President."²⁵

MoveOn's invocation of "focusing" helped amplify the opinions of supporters into a political demand. MoveOn was not a polling operation. Rather, they aimed to bridge the gap between polling and the many activities and modes of civic participation typically associated with the petition. This was particularly evident on the FAQ page, in answer to the question of "why" MoveOn was formed. MoveOn again reached for polling, arguing that

The disconnect between our country's leadership and the will of the people is huge. Politicians are avid poll readers, yet often discount these results as reflecting ill formed opinion, likely to shift with the winds. This site is a way for citizens to express a clear message to Congress *and* to organize action if the message isn't heard.²⁶

MoveOn tapped into arguments about the problem of intensity in polling. Even if a certain percentage of Americans supported a particular measure, for example, it was difficult to gauge how deeply the belief was held, or even whether the individuals polled would be prompted to act based on those beliefs.²⁷ MoveOn aimed to capitalize on the authorizing force of majority opinion by conveying the campaign as a channel that could also drive action moving forward.

²⁵ Move On, "Million Move-on March," *MoveOn.org*, September 29, 1998, available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, archived May 3, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990503164223/http://www.moveon.org:80/release29.htm>

²⁶ MoveOn "Frequently Asked Questions."

²⁷ This is a common theme in scholarly discourse about polling. See for example See Herbert Blumer, "Collective Behavior" in *New Outlines of the Principles of Sociology*, ed. Alfred Lee (New York: Barnes and Noble), 87.

Temporality and Intensity of Activities

MoveOn framed counting as a demand and participation in the campaign as a demonstration of intensity of supporters' commitment to action. The campaign emphasized a wide array of actions outside of just counting and collecting names that could be used by citizens to demonstrate the intensity of their feelings. These actions ranged from pledging money, to volunteering time, to downloading the banner and posting it on personal websites. Of course, these actions were still counted and represented numerically. First, MoveOn used counts of all manner of activities over short periods of time. MoveOn employed the language of the "flash campaign" to denote snapshots in time manifested as short bursts of intense activity. Every press release posted by MoveOn in the first few months of the campaign featured a new measure of this participation expressed as a number and nearly all of them had several in the first paragraph alone. For example, in the very first press release on the first day of the campaign, MoveOn concluded by referring to the "first dozen signatories each sending their email notices out to several dozen friends." Similarly, in their second press release, MoveOn described its early success in which "the website collected 506 signatures and added 12 new volunteers its ranks." It was not just that MoveOn received 506 signatures and 12 new volunteers, but that they did so "in the first 24 hours."²⁸ The frequent numerical updates about the campaign bolstered MoveOn's claims to the enthusiasm of supporters. These snapshots also demonstrate sustained involvement and growth that extended far beyond the "five-minute" activist. The more accurate depiction of a MoveOn member, they suggested, is not the five-minute activist, but rather the activist who spent five minutes five times over two weeks.

²⁸ MoveOn, "Censure and Move On flash campaign takes fire," *MoveOn.org*, September 23, 1998. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, archived May 3, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990503110007/http://www.moveon.org/September%2023%20Release.htm>

In nearly every effort undertaken by MoveOn over the course of the six months of the campaign, this rhetorical formula remained consistent. After the announcement of the *We Will Act* pledge asking members to volunteer for congressional campaigns, MoveOn reported that, “In the past 24 hours, thousands of concerned citizens have taken MoveOn’s ‘We will act’ pledge.”²⁹ On the *We Will Remember* pledge, “By the end of the next day, we had received pledges totaling more than \$5 million,” a figure Blades called “astounding.”³⁰ The focus on short bursts of time created a sense of urgency and of perceived constant action.

MoveOn also displayed intensity of support through the accumulation of lengthy lists of activities. The exemplar of accumulation was the FAQ page. In addition to very brief descriptions of the campaign and its goals, the bulk of the page featured a timeline that MoveOn used to communicate the substance of the campaign. This bulk was dominated by the list of actions organized by date. What does MoveOn.org do? *Everything*. Much of the list in September and October was dominated by updates on the petition, with new numbers of signatures. By October, MoveOn made no distinction between actions performed by supporters and those sanctioned by the campaign. These measures helped show the sheer volume of involvement in the campaign. The timeline featured updates such as “411 volunteer leaders selected” and the “3,000 mark” for the “volunteer pool” right before listing “20,000th ‘MoveOn’

²⁹ MoveOn, “Continuing Impeachment Trial Spurs Thousands to Work In Year 2000 Election Campaigns,” *MoveOn.org*, January 28, 1999. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, archived May 3, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990503132838/http://www.moveon.org/release0128.htm>

³⁰ MoveOn, “Grassroots Internet Campaign,” *MoveOn.org*, January 6, 1999. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, archived May 3, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990503132838/http://www.moveon.org/release0128.htm>

bumper sticker downloaded for printing,” or the “500,000 impressions of ‘MoveOn... Vote today’ banner placed on Yahoo.”³¹

This was but one visual instance of what characterized so much of MoveOn’s discourse: flashes of individual actions added up to a powerful national campaign. The visual design of the website emphasized the same message, offering a running count of how many signatures had been collected, how many pledges made, and how many volunteer hours clocked.³² In their press releases, MoveOn similarly appealed to accumulation. They reported publicly on all manner of data, from hours volunteered to date, to the number of e-mails sent to supporters to get out the vote in the midterms, to the number of phone calls to representatives. Supporters, they suggested, did not just do one thing in a flash; they did two, or five, or six things in a matter of days.

If polling, as MoveOn argued, was too easily dismissed by politicians who viewed the percentages as “ill formed opinion, likely to shift with the winds,” then representations of intense periods of flash activism could not so easily be disregarded. “And, if Congress and the President can’t figure out how” to reach a compromise as MoveOn had, the signatures on the petition were also “a million reasons to try just a bit harder.”³³ Their measures, MoveOn argued, “show[ed] dramatic growth” in citizenly commitment to their cause.

Conclusion

MoveOn’s triumphant discourse about the democratic potential of the web centered less on the logic of the “mass” that radio and television claimed as their audience and more on the logic of iterative intensity as a measure of participation. The internet was a medium of aggregate

³¹ MoveOn, “Frequently Asked Questions.”

³² MoveOn, “Censure and Move On,” *MoveOn.org*, January 25, 1998. Available through the *Internet Archive* Wayback Machine, <https://web.archive.org/web/19990125090948/http://moveon.org:80/>

³³ MoveOn, “Million Move-on March.”

actions, not just attitudes or opinions. If MoveOn faced accusations of fostering “slacktivism,” they argued to the contrary that the campaign represented a network of intentional, and intense, actions. Their plethora of counts and their heavy reliance on percentages and ratios was meant to demonstrate, as Blades repeatedly suggested, that the internet could be a means of activating a new American consensus in an era typified by partisan political fracture.

MoveOn, like Farrakhan, was concerned with providing a new means of counting in the face of inadequate counts by institutions. MoveOn turned not so much to *who* does the counting, but *what* does the counting. MoveOn’s answer was organizational and technological: the “web” was the channel through which opinion could become *demand* through the efforts of passionate citizens.

Scholarship on online political participation, particularly e-petitions, has tended to focus on the degree to which online activities can be mapped onto offline public engagement.³⁴

MoveOn was much more than an online petition platform: they consciously sought to use the internet to spur citizenly action, even if said actions occurred in relatively short bursts. And MoveOn did this with remarkable organizational efficiency. As David Karpf argues, MoveOn.org was an exemplar of the rise in “organizing without organizations.”³⁵ New activist or social movement organizations like MoveOn used internet technology to organize and mobilize without the resources required by their pre-internet predecessors (e.g., significant staff,

³⁴ David Karpf, “Online Political Mobilization from the Advocacy Group’s Perspective: Looking Beyond Clicktivism.” *Policy & Internet* 2, no. 4 (2010): 7-41; Stuart W. Shulman, “The Case Against Mass E-mails: Perverse Incentives and Low Quality Public Participation in U.S. Federal Rulemaking.” *Policy & Internet* 1, no.1 (2009): 23–53. More broadly, a number of scholars have focused on the potential issues of online engagement. See Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); Robert W. McChesney, *Digital Disconnect* (New York: New Press, 2013).

³⁵ See Karpf, *MoveOn Effect*, 3.

a formal headquarters, or local bases).³⁶ Indeed, as Blades often celebrated, MoveOn was able to do a lot with very little, financially speaking: “We spent 89.95 on a website, and sent out a few dozen e-mails. And now, a week later we’ve got 100,000 signatures.”³⁷ But the internet did more than facilitate economic efficiencies: internet technology gave MoveOn access to metrics that were previously difficult, expensive, or time consuming to collect, such as the arduous processes of contacting petition signers to engage them in further activities.

Thirdly, the internet gave MoveOn a new window on *time*. The “flash” was more than a metaphor. Because online activity can be measured in numerous ways, including using time metrics of minutes, seconds, hours, and days, MoveOn could provide new forms of “snapshots” of collective action and activity, even as they could break those snapshots into smaller parts through percentages, ratios, and other forms of comparative counting. In this way, as I have argued, they were able to do more than count signatures: they were able to count actions, and thus intensity—and then render them for public display.

This ability has key implications for the vision of progressive activism MoveOn reconfigures. MoveOn focuses on short but intense bits of varied action by citizens rather than sustained work and membership in long-term organizations. Indeed, what makes MoveOn historically important is the ways in which they made the metrics they crunched and calculated not only public, but integral to their public rhetoric. Many advocacy organizations collect data on supporters and various other activities, but these are more often than not used for strictly internal

³⁶ Karpf, *MoveOn Effect*, 4; Debrej Ray and Joan Esteban, “Collective Action and the Group Size Paradox,” *American Political Science Review*, 95, no. 3 (2001), 663–72.

³⁷ MoveOn, “Million Move-on March.”

purposes in order to run campaigns.³⁸ By contrast, given the arguments in the previous chapters of this dissertation, I argue that MoveOn turned the representation of data into a rhetoric, tapping into a history of desire among American citizens to be counted and to see themselves in numbers.

³⁸ In fact, MoveOn would later become known for their hesitance to share internal data, much of which they not only released, but used to describe the nature of their campaign in 1998 and 1999. Karpf, *MoveOn Effect*.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Whether it is a million signatures, a million marchers, or a million letters, the aspiration for a million is ubiquitous in the history of American civic participation. The National Association of Woman Suffrage sought the million-signature mark in 1908, which was the continuation of a tactic they learned from abolitionists. The 1995 Million Man March inspired the 1997 Million Woman March, two Million Youth marches in 1998, and the Million Family March in 2000. And despite the advances of technology that have made the *million* marker more accessible, a million mouse clicks remains a common goal in digital activism movements such as the 1995 MoveOn anti-impeachment petition. The “million” has a significant place in the national imagination. Though a fraction of the 330 million citizens of the United States today, a “million” still conveys weight, because it facilitates association without calling for precision. It is not 1.2 million, or 700,000—but a “million.” The generic quality of a million allows for the broad claims of a collective to mean something big in American democracy. And yet, in spite of this preoccupation with the “million,” NAWSA, Louis Farrakhan, Roosevelt, and MoveOn provide very different visions of what the million can tell us about the individuals they count, and the American public more broadly. It is these claims about American civic life that ground this dissertation.

In Chapter 1, I argued that aggregates of citizen actions, beliefs, and behaviors have long been prominent in American public discourse, serving as resources for negotiating questions of national identity and public opinion.¹ This dissertation contributes to the work of William Alonso

¹ On the census, see William Alonso and Paul Starr, introduction to *The Politics of Numbers*, ed. William Alonso and Paul Starr (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1987), 1-6. For public opinion polling, see Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of the Mass Public* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 14.

and Paul Starr, Sarah Igo, and others by exploring how these claims are reflected in various aggregating practices beyond polling and the census. Rhetorical scholarship on public policy shows that invoking collective opinions or beliefs as a representation of “the public” serves to reinforce the authority of political leaders and to authorize the role of the public in democratic decision-making. Rhetorical scholarship also shows that these claims are often contested.² Conversely, scholarship on public opinion shows that political actors construct public opinion within broader arguments about particular issues or policies, justifying measures through collecting opinion.³ Studies of citizenship illustrate how the performance or habits of citizenship have shaped conceptions of what citizenship is, and how individuals understand their relationship to other citizens and the nation.⁴ Among these performances, I have shown, is the practice of calls to be counted.

Suffragists, as I showed in chapter 2, argued that not “all women” or “all men” should or need be counted. I argued that Julia Ward Howe and Alice Stone Blackwell emphasized the importance of counting active citizens with a “lively interest,” and in counting *actions* rather than opinions or beliefs. Suffragists framed counting as a means to understand the “public

² Jeffrey Mehltritter Drury, *Speaking with the People's Voice: How President's Invoke Opinion* (College Station, Texas A&M University Press, 2014), 5; J. Michael Hogan, *The Nuclear Freeze Campaign: Rhetoric and Foreign Policy in the Telepolitical Age* (East Lansing, Michigan State University Press, 1994), 120; David Levasseur, “The Role of Public Opinion in Policy Argument: An Examination of Public Opinion Rhetoric in the Federal Budget Process, Argumentation and Advocacy,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 41 (2005), 155-157.

³ Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

⁴ Angela G. Ray, “The Rhetorical Ritual of Citizenship: Women's Voting as Public Performance, 1868-1875,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 93, no. 1 (2007): 1-26; Michael Shudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (New York: Russell Sage, 1999), 7-9; Susan Zaeske, “Signatures of Citizenship: The Rhetoric of Women's Antislavery Petitions,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88.2 (2002): 148. On citizenships exclusions, see Robert Dechaine, “Bordering the Civic Imaginary: Alienization, Fence Logic, and the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95 (2009): 44; Karma Chavez, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 13.

spirited minority.” This majoritarian logic, Blackwell argued, is the logic of American democracy. And yet, suffragists extended the logic beyond the vote to all manner of participation in public life. In response to Mary Ward’s arguments that “all women” needed to desire suffrage, and thus that the suffrage movement was in clear decline, suffragists counted activities ranging from petition signatures, membership in suffrage organizations, and voting participation to argue for suffrage. Suffragists sought ultimately to count a majority of votes, within a minority of the American population: active citizens.

In chapter 3, I argued that Franklin Roosevelt called for letters to the White House as a way to collect, understand, and aggregate the public will, so as to “think as a nation.” Roosevelt adopted a rhetoric of aggregation which allowed him to develop a sense that letters could be added up to something more than the sum of their parts. Seeing them as more than merely social scientific data, Roosevelt focused on the political importance of individual letters to the president, which allowed him to reinforce his characteristic “personal” connections with ordinary citizens. Roosevelt negotiated the challenges of political authority during the Great Depression by asserting the competency of his administration to collect, sort, and determine the public will through an aggregate of letters sent to the White House, while at the same time maintaining letter-writing as a means to communicate intimately with the president. The Republican National committee, surprisingly, reinforced, rather than challenged, Roosevelt’s general vision of the letters and his capacity to channel the public, by claiming the White House was not handling letters responsibly enough.

In chapter 4, I argued that Louis Farrakhan counted to identify the hidden history of the black man in the United States. Farrakhan linked a process of atonement to the recognition and airing of societal ills, which were revealed through a vision of the national mall that emerged

through Farrakhan's distinct approach to numerology. In this case, counting was a transformational process of moving towards "oneness." The *transformation* of the many to the one did more than atone; it revealed a nation—a black nation—within a nation. Farrakhan's prophetic vision became a means of belonging to what he termed a "perfect union."

In chapter 5, I showed how MoveOn invoked counting to argue for an end to the Clinton impeachment proceedings. For them, public opinion, channeled through MoveOn's web-based technologies, was more than a petition campaign. It was a repertoire of brief, digitally enabled, political actions: reflected in e-mails sent by volunteers, the number of impressions of an ad, donations received, and volunteers registered. MoveOn thus portrayed "digital activism" as comprised of brief but intense moments of action, moments that—like the logic of digital advertising itself—were repeated over and over to demonstrate the intensity and passion of digital citizens. And yet, in this case citizens did not act as "one" so much as a ratio of one. MoveOn's heavy reliance on percentages and ratios demonstrated that it was possible to aggregate citizens in loose alliances, and to understand collective expressions as compromises.

Therefore, calls to be counted provide distinct visions of what it means to be counted in democratic life. Calls to be counted, for one, negotiate questions of who should be counted in democratic decision making or in the nation. Suffragists, for example, argued that only "active citizens" should be counted, in order to determine whether a sufficient sentiment existed to legitimize women's claims to the vote. For Roosevelt, it was all [literate] citizens that must be aggregated through the letter. Farrakhan invoked the black nation as an object to be counted according to secret mysteries and a shared vision. And MoveOn aimed to count in order to demonstrate the pragmatic sentiments of "most Americans" amid major partisan fights in Washington.

These calls raise issues of who does the counting. Roosevelt and Farrakhan are both concerned with counting as a way to ground their personal authority through the act of counting masses of marchers or citizens. Roosevelt positioned himself as a channel of the masses, while Farrakhan took the persona of the prophet providing vision to the march. MoveOn's "who" was not personal so much as it was organizational and technological—concerned citizens using the web, in their vision, could do the best counting. Suffragists drew on the conventional democratic answer to who counts: political officials through the voting booth. Suffragists extended the logic of the voting booth to public debate to oppose the anti-suffragists and the American public's perceptions of public sentiment.

How these movements counted citizens is similarly wide ranging, from orienting counts in specific places, to episodes of time, or through calculations. These methods of counting can be bolstered by common rhetorical strategies that emerge from the Aristotelian concept of magnitude, including accumulation, repetition, elaboration, as well as an emphasis on time and place. Place emerges as a common theme in calls to be counted. For Farrakhan, gathering in one place, both physical and spiritual, was key to being counted. Conversely, place can also be a way to demonstrate the scope of counting. Roosevelt referenced an array of cities or regions as a way to reassure citizens that they would all be counted. MoveOn referenced different congressional districts or states as a way to lay claim to speak to the public opinion as a whole, rather than simply the members. For suffragists, more than demonstrating the reach of the movement, references to specific states or cities were a means to demonstrate the clusters of activities, or members, or organizations in one place. These clusters demonstrated intensity. In contrast, anti-suffragists relied far more on chronology to evaluate the declining intensity of the movement. The various defeats of suffrage amendments served as a way for the anti-suffragists to

demonstrate a waning interest in the movement across time.

Time is also key to the rhetoric of counting. MoveOn segmented activities in short episodes of time as a way to demonstrate the intensity and immediacy of movement responses, much in the same way suffragists used a rhetoric of place. Roosevelt emphasized the constant need for letters, but in his explicit calls on FERA and the extraordinary session, he also created a sense of urgency, particularly in sending letters to pressure Congress over a shorter period of time. Suffragists, in contrast, sought to shift focus from recent unsuccessful votes for amendments by counting longitudinally. The long and dedicated activities of suffragists, which were only growing over time, suggested the inevitability of the movement's success. Conversely, for Farrakhan, what mattered was the one day in which black men gathered to be counted and to account for their sins. These strategies often served to divide the counts of petition signatures or letter-writers into commensurate parts through time or space as a way to draw conclusions about the whole.

Central to these calls are the distinct types and logics of counting that emerge from the rhetorical concept of *magnitude*, from degree, quantity, aggregation, or oneness. Counting as an *aggregate* emphasizes size or volume. Quantity, in turn, focuses on specific numbers such as a million members of the crowd. Claims based on the degree offer more complicated calculation from percentages to ratios to help create a sense of scale related to the whole. These discourses resemble and often borrow heavily from the logics of social scientific counting in which a sample (a “part”) of a given population is used in order to quantify and speak to the larger class (the “whole”) of American citizens, this is also often the logic of civic quantification. Simplistic counts—in which one million individuals sign a petition or show up to a rally—would seem difficult to speak to the whole of the American nation. And yet, movements do sometimes seek

to take on a broader voice than just participants in a campaign. The affordances of digital technology provided MoveOn with the capacity to quickly survey and measure all manner of actions or characteristics of members, from which they could claim to speak for the American public. Roosevelt, similarly, sought to use the subtle language of sampling to reassure citizens of his grasp of the whole nation.

The conclusions about the “whole” however, are dependent on the logics of counting that emerge from each movement. Arguments about who counts, who should be counted, and how we should be counted, all emerge from what is ultimately being counted. This question engenders attention to what movements aim to speak to, be it public opinion or perhaps national characteristics or values. Counting, however, also attends to certain logics. Farrakhan is concerned with the logic of the nation, transcending the parts to the “one” nation. The process by which “many” become “one” relies on a transformation that transcends a concern for the many at all, or their differences. Nationhood presumes oneness rather than creates it. Oneness can also emerge from claims to the homogeneity of opinions or characteristics distinct from the nation. Claims to what “most Americans believe” are premised on the logic of majoritarianism, but these claims can easily slide into “what *Americans* believe” without the qualifier, which more closely resembles claims to oneness. Arendt’s concern for the eradication of the minority through majority rule is realized discursively in claims to oneness that transmit the majority opinion or characteristic to the whole.⁵ A lack of specificity can lead to claims to homogeneity, as is the case with Roosevelt’s call to think as a nation.

Suffrage, on the other hand, appealed to majoritarianism but provided specific measures that made clear the existence of dissenting opinions. MoveOn assumed a degree of homogeneity

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 155.

in public opinion on Clinton based primarily on polling. Still, MoveOn navigated the creation of a shared purpose without creating a sense of oneness by emphasizing the counting of loose associations through percentages and ratios of participant characteristics. MoveOn comes close to Danielle Allen's call to utilize metaphors of "wholeness" rather than "oneness" as a way to understand the relationships and responsibilities within a collective. "Wholeness," she argues, recognizes difference.⁶

When citizens are called to be counted, these calls also negotiate the challenges of democracy and exclusion that emerge from majoritarianism and minoritarianism, homogeneity and heterogeneity. This dissertation ultimately argues that the discourses and logics of the rhetoric of counting are more than ways in which Americans contest and lay claim to the public will or to national identity—they are crucial performances of citizenship itself in the context of modern mass democracy.

⁶ Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 17.